

VATES ASKS FOR HELP DEFENDING BRITAIN

Claims that it's not just his war

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Harry vates made a speech on the grounds outside Hogwarts today, defining new goals for the Second War with You-Know-Who. He made some rather surprising points, given that so far he has rarely worked with ordinary wizards and witches on anything but a local level. He believes that You-Know-Who is hunting him personally, and that if he dies, it might mean the end of the war for some people—but that it should not. He used the metaphor of a wheel that many people must keep pushing in order to symbolize the war's success.

Reactions to the speech were mixed.

"It's an admirable gesture, of course, but one gets the feeling of 'too little, too late,'" one witch on the street told this reporter. "If You-Know-Who really wants Harry, then he'll hunt him. The rest of us can't do anything to help."

"The vates is trying to reassure people in the best way he knows how, by showing respect for their freedom and their ability to help the larger war effort by doing small things," Acting Minister Juniper said. "It's an admirable effort, but so long as he divides Britain the way he's doing now—acting separately from the Ministry, calling on foreign countries to become involved in a struggle that's not theirs to fight, and refusing his duty according to the prophecy—then he'll only convince people they should be taking up extra duties. Those duties aren't theirs. Only a Lord-level wizard can face a Lord-level wizard." The Acting Minister did not respond to questions about his opinion on the presence of two Ladies in the country.

Among those people who have been saved by Harry's training or allies, however, the reaction was markedly different.

"We can make a difference, and I wonder that I never thought of that before," said Cedric Diggory, a young wizard who left Hogwarts a few years ago and is now Reserve Seeker for the Falmouth Falcons. "When Harry trained us in dueling spells in Hogwarts, it seemed separate from what happened outside it. A game. But the battle's come now, and it's not a game. Everyone has to help." Diggory went on to follow his interview with an announcement that he intends to leave the Falcons in order to help the war effort.

"Well, I certainly intend to do all I can." So says May Morris, a Muggleborn mother of three who lives in London. "You-Know-Who has vampires and Dark wizards and God knows what else in his train, and he just shouldn't be able to have all the advantages, that's all. I have a brother who specializes in making ward-stones. It's a small enough sacrifice to bind a shard of myself to one and send it to Hogwarts to become a tireless guardian."

Members of the Wizengamot mostly remained silent, or were not available to comment.

The Vox Populi: Voice of the People

August 19th, 1997

PROPHECY OF FAILURE:

If the Ministry acts against the vates, they will lose

We're all familiar, by now, with the running dispute between our vates and the British Ministry. That clown who goes by the name of Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper believes that Harry must 'fulfill his duty' by fulfilling the prophecy and killing Voldemort, and, not incidentally, obeying the Ministry.

But there's only one prophecy abroad in the land, and who does it point to as the wizard we need to listen to and trust in? Not Erasmus Juniper. Harry vates, once called Potter.

He's right that he can't do this alone. He's even more right that he can't do this if people sit back and wait for him to rescue them.

And who's the biggest proponent of telling others to sit back and wait for him to rescue them? That's right. The Ministry, under Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper, willing to take the prophecy all too literally. "Because Harry is supposed to defeat You-Know-Who, he will," they pipe like stirred-up fairies. "He doesn't need any help."

Except that prophecies are never that clear, and of course Harry himself has asked for help.

This is the Vox Populi urging anyone and everyone who reads this article to contribute to the war effort, and turn against the Ministry. If you work for those bastards, don't go into work today. Send Howlers to the Acting Minister to let him know how

much you disapprove of his coarse, crude actions. Take money that you were going to spend on one of those futile protective amulets the government pretends to sell and send it towards the war effort instead.

It's much better than waiting around for the Ministry to seize your properties and your vaults, isn't it? That's what's been happening to some pureblood families the Acting Minister doesn't like the looks of.

Stand up. Fight! And let both the Acting Minister and Voldemort know that you don't intend to lose the war by lying back and letting the powerful fight it for you. They're bastards, the both of them. And bastards don't deserve either to win your support or to win a war.

The Daily Prophet
August 21st, 1997

ACTING MINISTER ANNOUNCES 'CAUSE FOR HOPE'

Cause has to remain 'secret for now'

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper called for a special press conference today in front of the Ministry. He announced that he has secured help for the war, and made an important step forward in a "cause for hope" that will ease the burden of those laboring under You-Know-Who's depredations and fears of discovery by Muggles all over the country.

"I'm afraid that cause for hope has to remain secret for now," he said apologetically when several calls for explanation arose. "It would reveal too much of our strategy to You-Know-Who if I simply announced it in public. But I can assure you that the Ministry has been very busy these past few days insuring that everything flows smoothly when things begin to change."

The Acting Minister called Harry's continuing attempts at both gathering help from ordinary wizards and witches and freeing magical creatures "admirable but misguided." "If he would accept the help and guidance of the Ministry," he said, "I think he'd soon find himself on the right road."

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Six: A Meeting of Ministers

Erasmus checked through the letters with a slight frown on his face. It was true that most of the Ministers he had sent owls to had replied to him; that part of the cause for hope he had represented to his people had not been a lie.

But most of the letters expressed reserved neutrality, even though they agreed on the importance of keeping the Statute of Secrecy. Some leaders said they could not travel to Britain at the moment, with the country in the middle of a war. Others hinted that they had problems of their own to deal with regarding Muggles in their communities piercing magical barriers and finding them out, and that while they wished Erasmus good luck, they could hardly spare him attention. The Ministers of Portugal, France, and Spain had never replied at all.

Sternly, Erasmus told himself he had not expected them to. They had sent help to Harry, after all. That alone signaled where they stood.

But he had hoped that he would manage to arrange a meeting with more than one foreign Minister. It seemed that he wouldn't. Evamaria Gansweider, the Minister of Magic for Austria, would be joining him in a few minutes. She at least was willing to talk about representing his cause to the International Confederation of Warlocks—something Erasmus couldn't do himself since he was only Acting Minister of Britain, and not an actual elected official.

Erasmus closed his eyes and tried to remind himself that this compromise, if less hopeful than he had expected or wanted, only had to endure a little while. Minister Gansweider could look at what was happening in Britain and take much more detailed information back to the International Confederation. Once the Ministers heard what was happening—from the mouth of one of their own, *not* biased newspapers or Harry's equally biased speeches—they would move.

Voldemort was a threat to their world. Erasmus did not doubt that, would not deny it. But he was also one they could contain in Britain, particularly if the prophecy came true and Harry destroyed him. The threat of revealing their world to the Muggles was one that stretched beyond the British Isles, and which other countries would have to act on hastily to prevent Harry's far-flung Light allies, the Opallines, from working at. If one branch of the Opalline family had shown off their holdings on the Isle of Man,

then, Erasmus was sure, it was happening elsewhere. The Old Blood tended to act and think as one.

“Sir?”

Erasmus stood up. An Auror named Hawksbane stood in the doorway, unsmiling—of course, he was always unsmiling.

“Minister Gansweider is here, sir.”

Erasmus made sure his official robes were perfect one more time—not completely formal robes, of course, because he didn’t wish to make a claim to status that he didn’t have—and that the translation charm was in effect. Then he nodded to Hawksbane and followed him into the corridor, where three more Aurors fell into place around him. It was a small guard for an Acting Minister in times of danger, especially since You-Know-Who had shown that he wasn’t above political assassination. Minister Gansweider would likely have her own guards.

She did, Erasmus saw when Hawksbane escorted him into the meeting room, a grand place decorated with stars in the twelve constellations of the Zodiac on the ceiling. Indeed, the two tall wizards who had accompanied her were so overwhelming that for long moments Erasmus could not see the Minister herself. But then they moved aside, and showed her.

She was taller than Erasmus had expected, though, of course, he had only seen her once, and that was kneeling down to peer through a Floo connection. She rose to her feet on seeing him, and faced him without a smile. She was dark-complexioned, dark of hair and eye—though a stray gleam of light from the ceiling showed that her eyes might be deep blue instead of brown. Her hair was long and thick, and her neck looked almost too slender to bear the weight of it.

“Minister Gansweider,” he said.

“Please, call me Evamaria,” she said, her voice staccato and sharp. It took him a moment to realize that was because she spoke English, without bothering to use the translation charm.

Erasmus nodded politely, though he would not think of her that way; there was too much potential for disaster in approaching an ally informally, especially in these troubling times. “Evamaria. Please, if you will sit down?” He swept a hand towards the chairs around the table, and she sat down as if expecting a trap to spring from the middle of one, all the while watching him carefully.

Of course, I have only proven myself interesting, not trustworthy, so far. Erasmus made himself comfortable in the chair across from Minister Gansweider. “You know that the International Statute of Secrecy has been violated several times in Britain in the past few months?” he asked.

“Yes.” Minister Gansweider leaned forward. “And I do not understand why you do not take a simple solution. In my country, we have a Dark Lady, but so long as we give her honor and humor her whims when the occasion requires, she works with us—or leaves us alone. I do not understand why the same effort has not been made to propitiate your Lord.”

So she does want to talk about the war. Very well. Gracefully, Erasmus switched the focus of his thoughts. “With You-Know-Who, that would be impossible, I’m afraid,” he said smoothly. “He wants the destruction of many Light wizards, or their submission to him, and the complete exile of all Muggleborns from the wizarding world. We cannot give in to him.”

Minister Gansweider’s frown grew more pronounced. “I did not mean the barking dog, Lord Riddle. I meant Harry *vates*.”

She spoke the title as if it were a natural part of Harry’s name. Of course, that would be the way that many people saw it, Erasmus reflected, and he had done little to keep that impression from persisting. “He is only a child,” he replied, “too young to understand what he wants. And he believes in unfortunate, undesirable things. Exposing our world to the Muggles, for example.”

Minister Gansweider ignored his subtle attempt to steer her back to the topic of conversation they’d actually come together to talk about. “He is seventeen, I had thought.”

“He is,” said Erasmus, wondering what that had to do with the statement he’d made.

“Legally an adult, then,” said Gansweider, and her stare seemed to go right through him. “Unless I have mistaken the British laws, in which case I must apologize most dearly.”

“He is legally of age,” Erasmus said. “But he is still a child in mind and beliefs, prone to be idealistic, and trying to do many things that do not involve the fighting of You-Know-Who. That is what I meant by child. And, of course, the beliefs that he does have are ones he conflicts with the Ministry on.”

“I believe a more useful course would be compromise,” Gansweider persisted.

Erasmus was unable to keep a frown from staining his face. “We have offered him several, Minister,” he said. At least he was able to keep his voice from sounding short. “He continues to reject them. He would not, for example, agree that we had the right to hold several of his close allies under suspicion because they bear the Dark Mark—the Mark of Death Eaters, You-Know-Who’s sworn companions—and because one of them had actually tried to kill the Headmistress of Hogwarts. He will not work with the Ministry in our attempts to rid Britain of Dark magic. He has offered shelter and refuge to those who break the law. He has had an active part in politics ever since he became fourteen, in fact,” he added, thinking of the way that Harry had managed to depose Fudge. Erasmus would be the first to admit that Cornelius was not the *best* Minister they had ever had—Scrimgeour had been far better—but that a child so young should have played such a decisive part in his retreat galled Erasmus. There was a reason that politics in Britain was a pursuit for older wizards. Only they were able to appreciate how much was put in danger by meddling. “We know that our beliefs and his lie too far apart for reasonable compromise.”

Minister Gansweider rapped her fingers on the table. Erasmus could almost feel her weighing whether or not to say something.

“Feel free to speak your mind,” he urged her. He wanted her to feel comfortable and able to be honest here. After all, he was hoping she would be the same way when explaining Britain’s condition to the International Confederation.

“You seem to have approached him as a child each time,” said the Minister. “With his youth in mind, and no other factor. Have you not tried approaching him as a powerful wizard? That is what we have done with our Lady for years. She was nineteen when her powers built to full strength, and we would not have arrived at a satisfactory resolution with her if we had thought of her only as a young woman, not one of the most dangerous and powerful witches alive.”

Erasmus sighed. “But your Lady Monika is a bit more reasonable, I trust? I have tried reason with Harry. It does not work. He does not understand the necessities of war. He continues to trust in unreasonable ideals even when it would be best to give them up.” He leaned forward. “He has already visited the Muggle Prime Minister of Britain, even though the problem of You-Know-Who’s depredations is not one that Muggles can solve.”

“Why did he wish to visit him, then?” Erasmus was at least pleased to hear the same bewilderment in Minister Gansweider’s voice that he had felt himself on hearing of Harry’s visit to Blair.

“Those unreasonable ideals,” Erasmus replied instantly. “The ones that do not allow him compromise. He said the Muggles should know the truth behind the war, and then they would be less likely to react irrationally. But how *else* could Muggles be expected to react when confronted with the magical world? It was madness to go to them, but Harry did it because he thought he should. He did not think about the fact that it was wartime. He did not think about our long history of separation from their world, and the *excellent* reasons that such separation was enforced in the first place. He simply did it because he believed his principles demanded it.”

Gansweider bowed her head as if in thought. Then she stood and said firmly, “I would like to examine a detailed history of every violation of the International Statute of Secrecy in the last several months, Erasmus. It is, after all, what I came here to do.”

Erasmus stood, smiling, and feeling warm inside again. *I have a champion, even if it is only one in the whole of Europe.* “Follow me, Evamaria.” He was just in time to catch himself before he said the title.

“Do you think that all Dark magic will be gone from Britain forever if we win this war?”

Aurora concentrated on her reply to Augusta Longbottom, who had once again written requesting a special dispensation for half-human wizards and witches whose conditions were not harmful to the “average viewer” to go without glamours in normal society, and tried to ignore Cupressus. She could always pretend that she hadn’t heard the question, after all. They were working in the most important room in the Ministry at the moment, the one that collated information on the breaching of barriers between the Muggle world and the magical world, as well as on wizards and witches whose demands might lead to such breaches. Every hour or so, frantic shouts rang out as someone discovered another breach, and the murmur of conversations and the scratch of quills was always loud. Not hearing someone was a perfectly legitimate excuse for avoiding conversation.

She did not understand the Apollonis patriarch of late, though when they first swore to the Order of the Firebird and began their rise to power she thought she had understood him very well. He worked with Juniper because he was fanatical for the Light himself and because Scrimgeour and Harry had personally insulted him.

And now—

Now he asked too many questions.

It had begun when he asked hard question after hard question about Juniper's anti-Dark legislation. He had asked which spells would be affected, and how well they could enforce the new law. It had come to the point where Aurora actively dreaded seeing him open his mouth.

And then he had started asking questions of other people. How likely was the Order of the Firebird to accomplish meaningful actions, and how likely to remain an empty oath? Why weren't they out fighting in the field against Voldemort? Harry might think himself limited to a defensive war, but that did not mean *they* were. When would the Ministry turn its attention to Ireland, where Death Eater activity was quietly but unmistakably increasing? Why had so many Light families turned to Harry as if he, and not Erasmus, was their last best hope?

On and on it went. Aurora didn't like his questions, because she didn't know what they implied. How could Cupressus's loyalty be wavering? He was not the kind of wizard who changed his mind.

And yet, sometimes, he spoke like someone on the brink of doing so.

"I asked you a question, Aurora." His haughty manner when he believed himself ignored had not changed, at least, she thought, and dug the quill into the parchment again. "Do you believe that all Dark magic will be gone from Britain forever if we win this war?"

Aurora sighed, scanned the letter to Mrs. Longbottom one more time, and decided there was nothing she could add but her signature. The reasons against removing the glamours in public were simple. The British wizarding population didn't need another source of shock and stress. And they didn't need to decide that many of the people they accounted human were in fact half-breeds, and therefore likely to act in the interests of strange and foreign powers, rather than pulling together with ordinary wizards and witches. Mrs. Longbottom understood that perfectly well, Aurora was sure, and only persisted in her deafness because she was on Harry's side. As long as she was polite, however, and from a fairly old, proud, noble Light family, then Aurora had to reply to her with the same politeness.

"I do not believe it will, Cupressus," she said, turning to the Apollonis patriarch. As usual, he sat over a map of Ireland, picking out hiding places and ambush spots for both the Death Eaters and those forces they might send to oppose the Death Eaters. "After all, there will be Dark wizards from other countries who wish to sneak in and sell forbidden goods to our people. And there is always *someone* who thinks that using blood magic is more convenient and easier than finding a difficult, expensive Light spell that does the same thing."

Cupressus stared reflectively over her head for a moment, then said, "You know that I am more than sixty years old, Aurora."

He is beginning a speech without a question? The shock undid her, and left her to flounder, looking stupid, for a moment. Then she coughed and said, "I was aware of your age, yes."

Usually, he might have thought that an insult, and replied with a keen-eyed glance and a stinging retort. Now, he just went on staring at the wall. Aurora had to keep herself from turning around and seeing if there was anything particularly fascinating about it.

"I have seen the Dark rise and fall in Britain over my lifetime," Cupressus continued in a musing voice. "And in Ireland, too, of course. We had rumors of Grindelwald—and then suddenly they were more than rumors, they were fact, with Lightning Guard members in the Wizengamot, arranging to hand our country over to Grindelwald and those Muggles he worked with. And then our own Light Lord killed the Dark one. Those were grand times. Grand ones." For a moment, a smile flickered across his lips. "We were all so sure that Dark was stamped out forever in the Isles, then. The plot the Wizengamot members had made was awful. Not only Muggles but wizards would have been sacrificed in a series of blood magic rituals to make certain key British Muggle defenses fail. And, well, we had a Light Lord and a hero. Why would anyone turn to the Dark?"

"But the Dark pureblood families remained, even if they dwindled in prestige and power, even if they worked to disassociate themselves from Grindelwald and his mad plan of controlling the Muggle world.

"And then Lord Voldemort arose. You remember that awful series of killings twenty years ago, the ones that made people afraid to say his name?" Cupressus cocked an eyebrow, and Aurora found herself nodding against her will. The *Daily Prophet* had carried for one day, before it was censored, the image of a young witch floating with a distended belly full of snakes that continually gorged on her flesh, regenerated it, and feasted on it again, all because she had read Voldemort's name aloud. And

that had been one of the milder attacks. “And the building Darkness, the horrible rumors that became fact. But it was still all right, because we had a Light Lord to face the Dark one, and then a child sent the Dark one away—forever, we thought. It was like something out of a history song.

“But the Dark pureblood families remained, even if they lost some of the power they’d raised back up since Grindelwald, and even if they had to resort to feeble excuses to explain away the Dark Marks on their arms.” Cupressus grimaced as if he’d swallowed a lemon. “And the Ministry accepted the excuses, and released many of them back into proper society, as if they had any right to the name of wizard.”

He lowered his eyes and sat in silence for a moment.

“And, Cupressus?” Aurora asked after a moment, forcing her voice into boredom. This was history she already knew, and even if his manner of telling it was rather compelling, she hated what it hinted at. Was Cupressus Apollonis feeling sympathetic for the Dark?

Surely not.

“Things have changed,” said the Apollonis patriarch to his desk. “There is no Light Lord. There is a Dark Lord, and a Light Ministry, and a boy who refuses to join either.”

“Of course there is,” said Aurora. “We *knew* that. But one of Harry’s problems is that he will not Declare, nor bend his pride enough to make any other gesture that would reassure a nervous and frightened people. He could heal the rift between him and the Ministry if he Declared for Light, but he won’t.”

“Do you not see?” Cupressus’s eyes rose back to hers, so intent that Aurora felt another ripple of unease travel up her spine. “Before, there were always two paths, between a Dark so awful that one must resist it, and an imperfect Light that one could strive to make better. There was little choice in such things. A Light family must of course walk the Light road.”

“I thought that was what you were doing now, Cupressus. When you swore to the Order of the Firebird—“

“Before,” Cupressus continued, as if he hadn’t heard her interruption, “there were always two paths. Now, there are three.”

And then he turned away and began working on the map of Ireland again, as if nothing had happened.

Aurora stared at the back of his neck, with the hairs rising on hers. Then she shook her head sharply and turned to find an owl to carry the letter she’d finished writing to Augusta Longbottom. After that, she had another meeting arranged with Feldspar Yaxley, who had promised to tell her something of great moment and importance.

She would not think about what Cupressus had said. Despite his eccentricities, he would not—could not—abandon the allegiance that had guided his whole life, she knew, and his oaths to the Order of the Firebird were likewise irrevocable. Most likely, he simply wanted more attention, more power in the decision-making process of the Acting Minister’s loyal ranks.

That sounds like the Cupressus I know.

Harry quickly slid the book beneath the library table as he heard the footsteps behind him, and buried his nose in a book about Unassailable Curses instead. A moment later, Snape cleared his throat in a pointed manner. Harry looked up and blinked at him. He hoped the true weariness behind the gesture would hide the overly innocent part, and clear Snape of any desire to read his mind.

“How many hours have you slept since the night of the attack on Lupin?” Snape asked.

Harry shot a quick glance around, but they were alone in the library, without even Madam Pince nearby. Harry relaxed a bit. “Three hours a night,” he said.

“You have tried—“

“Dreamless Sleep Potion, yes.” Harry made himself shrug. “It doesn’t work. The visions are stronger now that he’s returned to full power, and now that he controls them and *wants* to force me to have them, which wasn’t the case in fifth year. They can break through any Occlumency barrier I raise. I checked,” he added, in a deliberately bland tone.

Snape said nothing, but took a vial from his robe pocket. Harry studied the thick blue potion in it, and allowed his eyebrows to rise in curiosity. He didn't know the potion by either scent or color, which was unusual.

"This is a stronger version of Dreamless Sleep," said Snape. "Thickened with both a Calming Draught and a Lucid Dreaming potion."

Harry frowned. "But the Dreamless Sleep and the Lucid Dreaming potions should work against each other," he murmured. "Unless—"

Snape nodded. "The Lucid Dreaming permits dreams to happen, but the Dreamless Sleep prevents ordinary ones from breaking through," he said calmly. "And the Lucid Dreaming one gives you a degree of control. If this potion works as I think it should, then you have only to decide to dream about a certain thing as you fall asleep, and you will have those dreams instead of the visions."

Harry hesitated. "What about aftereffects?" he asked. "Would it permit me to wake, should I need to in a hurry? And will it leave me dazed the next morning?" That last was the reason he hated the Dreamless Sleep potion. The effect only seemed to grow more pronounced as he got older.

"It will insure that you have a full night's sleep, eight or nine hours," said Snape. "So, yes, it would be hard to wake you. As for the other, I believe the Lucid Dreaming addition should counteract that."

Harry shifted. "If there's a crisis in the middle of the night—"

"*Finite Incantatem.*"

Harry jumped at the words, less because they had startled him than because Snape's voice was so sharp. The spell made his glamour vanish. A moment later, Snape was tilting his chin up, and Harry was trying not to fidget as dark eyes stared into his own.

"You are a mess, Harry," said Snape. "Your eyes are bloodshot, you look as if you haven't eaten in several days, and your reactions are already becoming slower and duller than normal."

Harry stifled a flash of resentment. He had been about to take care of that; he'd found a solution in the book on his lap. But it wasn't a solution that he could explain to either Draco or Snape. They would have disapproved, and absolutely forbidden him to use it.

He knew he should trust them more. They had both said that to him enough times in the last few days. But still—if he had found a solution that would work, even if it *were* dangerous, did he have time to argue it over with them? It was no more danger than he faced every time he went to sleep and Voldemort hovered in his head, anyway. Voldemort's latest trick was forcing Harry to share the mental space of his captured Death Eaters. Being in Hawthorn's mind for most of last night, feeling her helpless paralysis and sharing her despair, had increased Harry's determination to do something that would not only end the visions but turn the trick on Voldemort.

"Do you have a true objection to drinking the potion?" Snape asked, his eyes so steady that Harry had to look away. "Or are you merely resentful that I found a solution—that I *helped* you, when your instinct is still to shun help that you did not have a hand in making or winning, directly?"

Harry spread one hand in a helpless gesture. "I'm trying to learn better about that," he whispered. "I'm *trying*. Why do you think I made that speech? And it worked." More people were pouring into Hogwarts to learn defensive spells, and a few people with specialized skills, especially Healers, had come to ask what they could do. Harry would like to place one Healer in every wizarding community of every size in Britain and Ireland, if he could.

"But you have made a point of not asking me and Draco and your brother for help in the past few days, either," Snape pointed out.

"I just—" Harry swallowed. "You do so much. I don't want to put extra burdens on you."

"And you do not wish to share reactions with us that you think we will disapprove of," said Snape, his voice without inflection.

Harry looked away.

He stiffened in shock as a pair of arms came around him, and Snape's voice whispered fiercely in his ear, "You will have my support in whatever you do from now on, Harry. The mistake I made the night you went to Cornwall was one I never should have made. You should have been able to come to me when James and Lily were murdered, when the darkness within you first made you wary of yourself, when you were afraid of failure. I *wish* to take up those burdens, as you call them. Will you trust me? Will you remember that I have said this? Will you come to me when you next wish to confess something?"

Harry swallowed, and looked at the vial of blue potion in Snape's hand. It had never even occurred to him that Snape might be able to invent a potion that would stop the visions. He had stopped himself from asking not because the justification about not putting extra burdens on Snape was foremost in his mind, but because it had seemed so utterly natural to act alone.

Even if I'm overcoming that with my allies, I suppose I might still have to work on it with my closest family.

"Yes," Harry whispered. "All right."

"Good," Snape said, with no change of expression and without releasing his hold on Harry, though Harry knew someone else could come into the library at any moment. "And now, what were you researching to end the visions?"

"Sir?"

"I saw you shove the book beneath the table when I approached you, Harry."

Harry ran a hand over his face. "I should have heard you coming."

"I told you that your reactions were dulling," said Snape mildly. "Now, what is the book?"

Silently, Harry pulled it out and showed it to him. *Diverse Dreams*. Snape said nothing about the title, only listened as Harry haltingly explained his theory. Given that he and Voldemort were connected by hatred as well as magic, he had thought he might be able to trap Voldemort in the most hate-filled corner of his own mind, and make him see what he *wished* to see, even make him think that Harry was succumbing to the loathing and would join his side soon.

Snape listened to everything without interrupting. Then he shook his head and said, "There is one thing you have failed to consider, Harry."

It was said so gently that Harry couldn't even take offense to it. "What is that?" he asked.

"Every other time we have fooled the Dark Lord like this," Snape said, "in your second year when I wove the shields around your box while Tom Riddle was trapped inside it to content his lust for pain, and in your fifth year when we created a deception to make him think he *must* attack Hogwarts on Midsummer Day, it barely succeeded. It required Legilimency, the will to domination that he wields so well and you do not. And the Dark Lord—this shard of him—has experience with that tactic now. If he sees something in your mind that pleases him, he is much less likely to simply believe it. He will probe and poke at you until he has the physical evidence and the glimpses into your emotions that he requires. False visions could not hold him for long."

Harry shut his eyes. "I didn't think of that," he muttered. "You're right."

"You will take the potion, then?" Snape asked, again without judgment, without accusation.

And that was all Harry had wanted, and thought it most likely that he wouldn't get—advice without chiding, showing him a better way while not telling him, constantly, that what he felt was wrong. He had dismissed it as a childish fantasy. Snape hated his parents too much not to make some comment about his grief for them. Snape believed him too strongly of the Light not to dismiss the darkness Harry harbored. Snape would sneer over Harry's attempts to keep the visions at bay, not try to understand why he wanted to do it this way.

And none of it was true. Harry could have the support he wanted, if he would reach for it.

It was nearly enough to make him cry. He convinced himself that was because of his weariness and not his weakness, and nodded.

"I'll try it," he said quietly.

Snape's arms tightened around him, and Harry would have believed that he felt something like a hug in them, if he dared to hope that far.

But the only thing his guardian said was, “Good.”

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Star of Hope

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He didn’t think the odd sight in front of him had anything to do with the blue potion that Snape had given him. At least, he hoped it didn’t, or he would refuse to take it again, because the thought of going through the rest of his life while seeing blue sparks was too annoying to contemplate.

A soft voice, skirled with music, said, “Harry? *Vates?*”

Harry sat up slowly. Draco mumbled and rolled over, which made Harry wonder if he couldn’t hear the voice, if it was directed to his ears alone. “Dobby?” he asked. Dobby was who the voice *sounded* like, but he had never taken this particular manifestation: a swirl of blue sparks like smoke from a fire, a dancing constellation that ran all over the air in front of Harry and braided back on itself like a ribbon.

“Not Dobby,” said the voice, and it gleamed and caught fire along its closest edge. Harry had to steel himself not to jerk back from it. “But one like him. You may call me—” It paused, then said, “I like Miranda.”

“Miranda?”

“Miranda,” said the light and the voice, and then they wove together into the shape of a small, darting green lizard with an enormous crystalline fan on its back, which scurried up the blankets towards Harry and sat there, flicking its long tongue at him. “I was the one who would have been a house elf that night you freed my mother, but when you cut our web, she managed to free both of us.”

Harry nodded, remembering now. Dobby had fetched him to the side of a birthing bed; a house elf named Jiv whose owner had given up on the claim to ownership was struggling to birth her child, and might easily have died with him. Harry had cut part of the web, freeing Jiv’s magic, which enabled her to save her own life and completely destroy the web waiting to take her child.

“Why have you come?” Harry asked, though he knew the answer might be any number of things. House elves were free beyond the imagination of wizards, at least in their proper forms. Miranda could have come to observe, to have fun, or to do something else that would only make sense to an immortal shapeshifter.

“To help you.”

Harry blinked and leaned forward. He had not expected that answer. “Help me in the war?” he asked.

The lizard tilted its head to the side and flicked its tongue again, as if thinking. “Help you with defending,” it said. “You need someone to help with the safehouses, don’t you? Someone trustworthy. Someone who can defend with more than wind, someone who won’t go flying off at every second moment.”

“Kanerva will help, but she isn’t dependable,” Harry murmured.

“And I am.” Miranda stamped her small feet and inflated the fan on her back until it gleamed like quartz. “I am very dependable! I want to help! Will you accept my help? Or will you send me away?”

“I would never reject anyone who wishes to help and has good intentions,” said Harry, still a little shocked. “But I—well, most house elves would have no reason to want to help wizards, since so many of us still enslave you.”

“But I have never been enslaved,” said Miranda. “And I have walked many paths already, and been in many shadows, and around many realms of bronze. There is no reason not to come back and want to help you, after that.”

Harry tried desperately to look as if he had some idea what she was talking about. “Very—well,” he said slowly. “If you’re sure that you want to do this, that it wouldn’t be a source of constraint for you.”

“I’m sure,” said Miranda, and scuttled closer, putting one foot on his hand. It was soft and sticky, like half-melted butter. Harry hesitantly touched her head. Her scales were green, he saw, flecked with gold, rather like the sight of his own soul that he’d had sometimes, the colors of Dark magic and Light. “I have never defended anyone before. I have been too busy learning. This will be

new. And one cannot have too much newness.”

Harry found himself smiling. “There are many people who would not agree with you.”

“I do not expect them to agree with me.” Miranda’s mouth fell open as she yawned, and then she curled close to Harry. “I wish to sleep here. Is there anyone who will object to me doing that?”

“Me.”

Harry jumped and glanced up. Argutus had his head curled over the top of the bed, and was glaring at Miranda. The Omen snake so rarely spent nights with him anymore—he preferred to wander the castle and concentrate on learning runes and what little he could of the English alphabet—that Harry had not even thought he was present, much less that he would be able to understand their conversation.

“I thought we were speaking English,” said Harry, with a glance at Miranda.

“Oh, I thought it would be more realistic if we spoke in Parseltongue,” said Miranda, “since I am a lizard. So I translated. Was that wrong?” She looked back and forth between Harry and Argutus—not anxiously, but alertly, as if she were interested in learning more about this strange new set of manners.

Harry toyed with the idea of telling her that she was a lizard and not a snake, and lizards didn’t speak Parseltongue, but decided against it. Argutus was hissing, anyway, complaining that she couldn’t sleep in his place.

“Why don’t *both* of you sleep in the bed?” Harry suggested at last. “Argutus on my chest, Miranda curled next to my side?”

Argutus turned his head from side to side, as if examining substandard prey offered to him. “*It will do,*” he said at last. “*As long as I am able to crawl up and curl into position first.*”

“Why wouldn’t I let you?” Miranda asked.

As stiffly as a serpent could, the Omen snake flowed up the bed, glimmering folds of scales lapping over Harry’s chest and shoulders. Harry stroked his spine, and wondered thoughtfully if Argutus had been ruffled about being ignored. He had said nothing, and so Harry had simply assumed that he didn’t mind. Of course, he hadn’t sought him out and asked, either.

So much of the war occupies my time and attention. If I have a choice between normal life and war, I seem to choose the war without faltering. I wonder if there is any way to alter that, to make myself remember and value the people—and snakes—around me more. Trusting Snape and Draco enough to tell them what I’m thinking is a good first step, but not enough.

Miranda followed Argutus, curling so close that Harry could barely distinguish her from the blankets and the warm drape of the Omen snake’s tail—until the fan on her back poked him in the side. He yelped, and Draco stirred, blinking open eyes that had gone hazy with sleep.

“Harry?” he whispered.

“It’s all right.” Harry stroked his back. “Just Argutus.”

Draco hummed in response, and moved closer, arranging his arm so that it draped over Harry’s chest but didn’t brush against Argutus. Harry blinked at nothing for a long moment, then let his senses casually extend in several directions, so that he could feel everything around him.

Nothing but warmth, cradling him so close that his eyelids drooped of their own accord, and he barely remembered to think of sunlight so that would be what he dreamed of, instead of having visions. He shifted a bit, or tried, but his muscles seemed to be puddles of mush, and he felt so good that the thought of moving too much hurt.

He was asleep more deeply and swiftly than he had managed in the past several months, enraptured in a warm pile of snake, lover, and transformed house elf.

“And you think we can trust her?”

“It’s not a matter of trusting me,” said Miranda, who clung to Harry’s arm, before he could respond. “It’s a matter of what I want to do. And I want to help.” She flicked her tongue out, and the fan on her back inflated, glittering in the midst of the sunlight that poured through the windows of the Great Hall. “I assure you, house elf magic is harder to pierce and drain and detect than ordinary wizarding spells.”

Harry could feel dubious glances coming their way. Well, he couldn’t entirely blame them.

He and Miranda had decided to make their announcement in full view of all the refugees living in Hogwarts, just after breakfast. Since so many people were caught between fear and fear—not wanting to stay in the school in case Voldemort attacked it searching for Harry, but also not wanting to go to a safehouse after what had happened to Malfoy Manor—Harry thought it would help them make up their minds.

But the glances were glassy, and the murmurs thick, and Harry knew that most of the refugees were probably wondering how exactly a *lizard* could help them.

“Miranda?” he asked.

She looked up at him and flicked her tongue.

“Could you transform?” he asked, making sure to speak in Parseltongue. “Become something else? Not a house elf, because they wouldn’t attribute much strength to that form either, but something that would strike them as beautiful and powerful and capable. They don’t think of lizards that way.”

Miranda lifted and flexed one foot in surprise. “They don’t?”

Harry shook his head.

“Very well,” said Miranda, though she still sounded painfully shocked, and then lifted her head. The fan on her back began to glow with captured sunlight. Harry fought the impulse to shade his eyes, even though several people in the crowd were doing so. He didn’t want to seem as if he doubted her power, or would look away from her at the very moment she was gathering her strength.

The sunlight expanded and fanned out into a star-shape. Miranda still floated in the middle of it, a pair of large green-gold eyes that reminded Harry of Dobby’s, but the shadow of her body was losing its form, expanding to become the edges of the star, while her limbs folded inward and melted. In moments, the star drifted towards the top of the Hall and hung just under the enchanted ceiling, solemnly beaming. Its colors were green and gold and crystal, a combination of Miranda’s scales and the fan on her back.

A current of wind and magic blew out of the star just then, and Harry inhaled the scents of jasmine and thyme. He felt as if the light were tugging his spirits up with it, forcefully making him remember there was such a thing as hope in the world, even in the middle of the Second War with Voldemort.

“She is a house elf,” said someone in an awed voice.

“And she’ll help us protect the safehouses,” said Harry quietly, his head still tilted back. Green and gold spots filtered through the light like the spots on a peacock’s tail, opening as eyes did, and then shutting again—winking at him, he thought. “She came back because she wanted to help.”

He shot a glance at the refugees, trying to see how many of them could read the message inherent in that. Faces grew thoughtful, at least where they managed to look away from the awe-inspiring sight that Miranda made and pay attention to what he was saying. Harry smiled. *Well, if I have to choose between their paying attention to me and their paying attention to her, I know what I’ll take.*

He held out his hand. “Can you show us how you’ll protect the safehouses, Miranda?” he asked.

Her light grew brighter, and then a curve of it detached itself from the edge of the star and descended like a great scythe. Harry made himself keep his arm out, though his skin crawled and he had to shove away memories of Bellatrix’s blade coming down and cutting off his left hand.

The scythe traveled just overhead, parting his hair, and then rushed back the other way. Now it resembled the great pendulum that Harry had once met in the Room of Requirement, the night that he changed himself and admitted that he hated his parents. Again,

memories went back into the mire at the back of his mind, not permitted to rise, and he kept his gaze and his pose steady.

The pendulum traveled back and forth several times, and Harry realized that Miranda was stirring up magic, gathering it to herself. But she wasn't drawing on Hogwarts's wards, nor draining the power of those in the room, the way that Voldemort or Harry would have had to do. She made the wind move instead, and inspired the movement with magic, and took it to herself.

The scents of jasmine and thyme grew thicker, and Harry closed his eyes briefly to prevent the tears from welling up. He could sense nothing malicious in that power. Perhaps it came from Miranda never having been imprisoned the way that Dobby and her mother had been, but it seemed that she had no notion of evil. She certainly had the power to do evil if she wanted, but why would she want to? Every turn of the pendulum, every pulse of light, asked that question, asked what use evil and ugliness were.

The scythe coiled back, now a flying whip of white and green and blue, and blended with the air itself. Then it seemed to pause. Harry craned his neck, trying to make out what the whip had wrapped itself around.

It turned out to be a fist of crystalline light, coming into existence to answer the whip. The fist relaxed into a hand shape, and then spread flat, growing into a white version of Miranda's star.

Harry felt the hand and the whip twirl past his head, and then Miranda reached casually into his head for the location of one of the safehouses—on the Hebrides, near the MacFusty dragon sanctuary.

A vision of the islands appeared before them. Harry shivered at the forbidding image of the stones and the leaping foam, and the cold that gripped and frosted them all year long.

Miranda's hand and whip traveled into the image, and then spread glittering husks of warmth around the isles, and the small building—larger inside than outside—that Harry had chosen for the haven. For a moment, the house elf magic flared so strongly that Harry feared Voldemort would sense it. But then it calmed, and wound itself into rock and water and air in a way that no wizard magic, with its insistence on distinguishing itself from its surroundings, ever could. When Harry blinked, he couldn't make out a trace of it.

"That is the way I will defend that one safehouse," said Miranda comfortably. "Others must be protected in different ways. But this will help. Won't it?" she added, as if wondering if this were a mistake, like her belief that humans would be impressed by the lizard form.

"It will do very well," said Harry, and shot her a smile that made the star-form dance back and forth in midair.

Harry turned to face the refugees again, and said, "I understand that it may be some time before you wish to leave Hogwarts for the safehouses, even now. Or you may wish to visit them and test the protections for yourself. But with Miranda's help, they will be more well-defended than ever before."

"Are you willing to wager our lives on that?" asked someone from the back of the crowd in a doubtful tone.

"More than that," said Harry. "My own." He looked at the vision of the safehouse, and then back at Miranda. "Can you keep that open while I walk through to the isles, Miranda?" he asked.

"I can," said Miranda.

Harry smiled slightly, hearing the teasing tone in her voice. "And will you?"

She bobbed from side to side in affirmation.

Harry stepped through.

He had to catch his breath, or try, as the wind whipped through him. He supposed that it was warmer now than it would be in the middle of September or December, but that wasn't much of a consolation. He took a stumbling step forward, wondering if he should cast a warming charm.

And then he was in the middle of a roaring heat as great as a fire. Harry blinked and looked up.

Above him floated a thin golden canopy, made of what looked like strained sunlight. It was house elf magic, he was certain, the

blanket of Miranda's power that surrounded the safehouse. When he turned around and stepped back through the curtain, though, he couldn't feel or see any trace of it, and the cold wind continued whipping past him unabated.

Harry smiled, and it felt—good. Unless Voldemort managed to steal the location from Harry's mind, or a traitor within the safehouse let him know where it was, only great ill fortune would reveal house-elf-protected refuges to him. Harry supposed he might do well to set up Secret-Keepers and Fidelius Charms on the safehouses, too, to restrict the chance of a traitor letting Voldemort know where they were.

If I can find people I trust to be Secret-Keepers, and some way to smuggle food in without using house elves.

The safehouse itself looked like an ordinary boulder now, until Harry actually touched the door. When he moved inside, he nodded to find rooms filled with thicker, warmer blankets than he had left them with, uncomfortable beds shifted into comfortable ones, and—a touch of Miranda's whimsy, he supposed—silver trees laden with amber fruit standing in several corners. The inside of the safehouse smoldered with summer heat, but it eased immediately with a cool breeze when Harry thought distractedly that it was becoming too hot. He suspected Miranda of a spell or a weave of magic that would respond to wizards' thoughts about things like the temperature.

And this is what we can expect when we leave house elves to their own devices, he thought, tilting his head back to gaze out the window at the edges of the storm-lashed island, *and let them return to help us as they wish, without coercion.*

A spark of light caught on the rocks, and Harry turned his head in that direction, wondering—because it had become instinctive, by now—what malevolence this was, and if Voldemort had managed to slip past Miranda's protections after all.

And then he was reminded that house elves were not the only freed magical creatures who might be inclined to repay kindness with kindness.

A unicorn was standing on the point of the island. Foam leaped around it and then fell back, a duller color than its coat. The horn sticking up from its head looked more like a corkscrew than any Harry could remember, and also shone with more of a warm, milky, pure inner light. It turned its head and briefly glanced at him from an eye that he couldn't catch the color of.

Then it turned and sprang out across the sea.

Harry watched it run, the light spreading from its hooves and rippling across the waves, and felt his heart lift in answer. There might well be other unicorns tearing along the streets of Muggle cities, or the length and breadth of the British Isles right now, and managing to spread as much or greater joy than this lone unicorn had managed to give him in a matter of moments.

He turned and strode back out of the safehouse and through Miranda's gate to Hogwarts, feeling more confident and relaxed than he had in a long time.

Snape eyed the blue potion once more, and then flicked his hand, burying the owl feather quill that had been used for three days in the center of the cauldron. A corner of the liquid wrapped around it, drowning it, and the edges of the plume wavered briefly as it sank, looking as if it had been coated by tar.

The potion gave a shushing sound more time, and then settled. Snape relaxed. That was the amount of potion Harry needed for one night brewed, and now he could think about something else.

In particular, what it would take to move this war onto an offensive basis.

No one else seemed to be thinking of it, which meant that he must. Harry, of course, was focused on defense to the exclusion of nearly all else. He did not even spend as much time researching Horcruxes as he did healing spells that would save lives, ways to make the safehouses impenetrable to attack, and dueling spells that would mean wizarding villages had a better than average chance of protecting themselves against Death Eaters, as long as enough of the people living in the village learned the incantations. Others were pursuing their small parts in the war—Rhangnara and Jing-Xi still researching the Horcruxes, Draco training to become better in battle with more skills than simply his possession gift, Regulus sorting through the Black artifacts to find some that might make a difference the next time Voldemort and Harry closed.

Snape could invent potions, but now that the most urgent one, to insure that Harry got rest, had been brewed, he would turn his attention to the purposes of offense.

Of course, the very best offensive tactic would be to destroy the Horcruxes. They knew where two of them were, now, and after hearing Rhangnara's rambling about the blood of Slytherin, Snape believed they knew the way that they could break the Unassailable Curse shielding the Peverell ring. The wand was beyond their reach for the moment, until they knew spells sufficient to remove it from Thornhall, where Indigena Yaxley had almost certainly taken it; Neville Longbottom was apparently working on those, a combination of actual spells and Advanced Herbology. The cup was also beyond their reach unless they managed to lure Evan Rosier close.

Snape knew the truth. If the Horcruxes had simply required a blood sacrifice to break their Unassailable Curses, he would have done his best to capture several of the Death Eaters and shed their blood on the ring and the Sword of Gryffindor. Or he would have controlled them with Imperius and had one walk onto the sword, the other commit suicide in front of the ring when they retrieved it.

Unfortunately, the Imperius Curse could not be used to get around the Unassailable Curses, which would be able to tell the difference between true love of Harry or desire to destroy a Horcrux, and feigned emotion grown in a victim's heart on command. There was also the small matter of Harry not forgiving him if he had found out Snape used the Imperius, but Snape was not worried about that. Harry would never have known. Besides, since he could not use the Unforgivable in any case, he would not be capturing Death Eaters.

Unless...

Snape cocked his head thoughtfully and began to pace back and forth in his office. That was another offensive tactic, of course, though sharply limited by the fact that they did not know where the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters were at the moment. Destroy the strongest parts of his gathering army, and he would not only suffer a disproportionate loss, given how few his servants were, but other Dark wizards might be discouraged from joining him.

But how was Snape to reach them? He had no idea of their location, and few would come to Hogwarts unless they were guaranteed to remain beyond the wards.

Then Snape paused and snorted at himself. *What is the one thing all Death Eaters have in common, besides a talent for Dark wizardry and some usefulness to the Dark Lord? Of course.* He pulled up his own sleeve and glared at the faded snake and skull on his left forearm.

He used it as a weapon against us. With any luck, it can become a weapon against him.

Snape turned and strode rapidly to the fireplace, casting a handful of Floo powder in as he knelt down. "Silver-Mirror!" he snapped, to establish the connection, and hoped that Regulus did not have it shut.

He didn't, and he must have had a ward with a silent alarm ready to summon him when someone looked through, since he didn't have a house elf. He appeared with black, seamed marks on the side of his face that were not mere soot or dirt, and which made Snape narrow his eyes, forgetting his question for a moment.

"What gave you *burns*?" he snapped.

"A warded door where the wards were rather stronger than usual, and not spelled to open to the Black heir," said Regulus lightly. "It is mostly grime, and not burns. See?" He pushed at his hair above his temple, and flakes of ash fell out.

"Idiot," Snape muttered, and then pushed ahead into the subject he had come about, refusing to let himself be distracted. "I need to know what happened when your Dark Mark was healed, Regulus."

Regulus lifted his eyebrows in curious question. "The first painting I went into, you mean? You know I can't tell you much about that, Severus. The secrets are to be kept between the Black heir and *his* heir. Spells will start to choke me if I do more than vaguely hint about it."

"I know," said Snape. "I wish to know what you *can* tell me. Did the healing remove a trace of the Dark Lord himself, or only flesh and skin and corrupt Dark magic? Did it cross the barrier separating body and soul, or was it a purely physical process? How long did the healing take?"

"I don't know how long the healing took in real-world terms," Regulus admitted. "At a guess, a week or a little more. And it wasn't purely physical, and it did have to dig out a shard of Voldemort himself. Not a soul-shard," he added hastily, presumably when he saw Snape's face darken. "It wasn't a Horcrux. But he had put a fragment of himself in it, the same way that you put a part of yourself in a ward based on blood. It's what allows him to track us, control us, infect—"

He broke off, coughing, his face turning so pale that the ashes on his temples stood out like bruises. He shook his head. "I can't talk about it any more," he muttered. "I'm already treading close to what the Black inheritance will let me reveal as it is."

"Very well," said Snape, as calmly as he could. The potion he would need to poison a Death Eater through the Dark Mark would not be easy; no potion that needed to cross the boundary between body and soul ever was. And if he had to work directly against the magic of the Dark Lord himself, he would need Harry's help.

He told himself that he had not expected it to be easy. And it was at least easier than destroying the Horcruxes, the only other effective offensive strike they could make.

Though even that would be easy if Harry were not afraid to ask people to die for him.

Snape put the thought aside for now. Plans that depended on Harry changing his nature would not come to fruition. Enough of his enemies had learned that over the years that Snape would not balance his own hopes for success on it.

"Severus?"

Snape looked up, cocking an eyebrow. Regulus had wiped more ash away from his forehead, and now looked almost like a normal human being again.

"I don't suppose that you'd care to come to Silver-Mirror this evening, and share dinner with me?"

Snape blinked. He had thought it was early for dinner, but a discreet *Tempus* charm revealed that he had in fact missed it, too caught up first in brewing and then his thoughts about what he must do to aid the war effort.

He should refuse, he thought. A poison that could affect Death Eaters would not brew itself. He needed to read and study before he could begin. And he needed to ask Harry questions, and figure out some way of experimenting on his own Dark Mark—and Peter's—that would not alert Voldemort to what they were doing.

But Regulus was looking directly at him, with that earnest gaze, as if friendship were real, that he had affected sometimes when they were both Death Eaters, and an hour's, or a few hours', delay would not make much difference to the ultimate progress of the potion. And relaxation was necessary to keep the senses alert and the mind functioning at the level a Potions Master required. Surely, his observations of Harry in the past few days had proven that.

"Very well," Snape agreed mildly, and used another handful of Floo powder to step through the fire.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Her Triumph

"You will like this better, Parvati, you'll see," her mother whispered, her hands smoothing gently up and down her back. "You'll have private tutors for this last year of schooling, and there are many, many careers in Britain and abroad that accept NEWTs taken privately, not in a magical school. It's certainly better than going back to a place so dangerous when there's a war on."

Parvati dared to roll her eyes, because her mother had her head buried in her shoulder and couldn't see her face. "Of course, Mother. It must have been habit that made me pack." She glanced at the neatly packed trunk that sat at the foot of her bed. She knew that one exactly like it sat in her sister's room. Padma was as determined to make her own decisions and go back to her girlfriend as Parvati was determined to go back to her boyfriend.

"Of course. Well, that's understandable. I know that you were looking forward to your seventh year at Hogwarts." Sita Patil pulled back and gave Parvati a fond smile, caressing her cheek now. "But you know that your father and I just couldn't bear it if one of you girls died in an attack on the school?"

Parvati spent a long moment staring into her mother's eyes, looking for some sign or glimmer of understanding. They were seventeen, now, she and Padma. Her mother must have been seventeen once. She would understand the currents of love and the desire to be courageous and dare many things that older wizards and witches would never do, wouldn't she?

But there was no such understanding in her mother's eyes. Reluctantly, Parvati told herself that it was time she stopped looking for it. Sita had already been out of school when the First War with Voldemort had become terrible, with a choice about whether or not to fight, and certainly with the option to remain quietly and peacefully within her home if she wanted. Her husband's family

had been neutral in the war, courted by both sides, and her parents had left Britain for a time, so she hadn't felt a true connection to anyone in the larger world.

Parvati did, though. And she was not about to leave them to fight the war alone while she had private schooling behind expensive and obscure wards.

"I know that," she said. "I know that you and Father love us, and I love you." She kissed her mother's cheek.

"I'm glad that you see it that way, Parvati." Sita stepped back from her with a little smile. "Your father and I were certain that you were going to break our hearts someday when you were Sorted into Gryffindor. But I'm glad that you've decided to be a sensible girl like your sister."

Parvati gave her mother a dazzling smile, while silently reflecting that neither Sita nor Rama, their father, knew Padma at all. "I'll unpack," she said, and turned towards her trunk.

Her mother trusted her, and left the room, shutting the door. Parvati at once dropped the lid of her trunk and glanced around, looking for anything she'd forgotten to take.

The only thing remaining that she'd really wanted to find room for and couldn't make fit, though, was her full-length mirror, which stretched not only from floor to ceiling but also from one wall to another, showing the entire expanse of the quiet wooden bedroom where Parvati had spent most of her holidays for the last six years (she and Padma had both come back from their first year Hogwarts insisting on separate rooms). She couldn't be sure of carrying the mirror unbroken to Hogwarts, unfortunately, and trying to arrange for shipping would surely have alerted her mother that something was going on. She did go and trail her fingers over the mirror in farewell, making it wake up and purr its pleasure.

Someone knocked on her door, as her mother had just a few minutes ago, but this time the light knock was immediately followed by three heavy ones. Parvati relaxed and skipped across the room, opening the door to reveal her twin sister's face.

Padma had her trunk in the pocket of her robe already, with spells that Parvati wished she could perform as neatly, and a few textbooks in her arms with their covers Transfigured to look like those awful nineteenth-century romances that their mother read. Parvati rolled her eyes. Trust Padma to have had trouble fitting *books* into her trunk.

"Are you ready?"

Padma's eyes were huge and brown, like her own, but right now they were bigger than normal. Parvati supposed that was only to be expected, like the books. Padma was a Ravenclaw. She was brave—she'd trained in dueling with the rest of them, and helped to guard Harry when the rest of her House went mad in fifth year, and stood up against the people who thought she was mad for dating Luna—but she always would hesitate before she broke a rule, even a rule that deserved to be broken because it was so stupid.

"I am." Parvati shrank her trunk and tucked it into her pocket, glanced one more time at the mirror, which mewed after her, and then turned around and nodded at Padma. "Let's leave."

Predictably, of course, Padma hesitated then. "Are you sure that we shouldn't negotiate with Mother and Father one more time?" she whispered. "They're going to miss us. You know they are—"

"And we've tried that," said Parvati. "Both your negotiation and mine." Padma's had involved legal documents showing that, since they were seventeen now, and adults in the wizarding world, they could do what they liked. Parvati's had involved loud screams and thrown vases. Neither had worked. "They don't *accept* it, Padma. Circumstances were different when they were young. And that's fine for them, but it's wrong for us. We have to do something different. Unless you're backing out now?" She tossed her long braid of black hair over her shoulder and fixed her eyes on Padma's face.

"Of course not," said Padma, her voice softening. "I want to see Luna again."

Parvati just nodded. She would never understand what her sister saw in the Lovegood girl—Merlin, she didn't know why her sister wanted to date *girls* at all—but Padma was her sister, and Parvati loved her, and if Padma had wanted to stay behind or run off to Hogwarts all on her own, Parvati would still have supported her. That was what sisters did.

She reached out, and Padma entwined her fingers with hers. They both pulled their wands from their pockets and walked down the hallway together, then down the stairs towards the fireplace and their house's Floo connection.

Today was September first, and normally they would be at King's Cross already—Sita liked to arrive early so as to spend more time fussing over her daughters—and on the Hogwarts Express. But since their parents wouldn't take them and neither Parvati nor Padma could Apparate yet, they were taking the Floo into Hogwarts's hospital wing.

Parvati stood behind Padma as she tossed the Floo powder in and started the flames flaring green.

"Daughters? Where are you going?"

That was their father, Rama, who'd just emerged from his indoor garden behind the stairs. Parvati pointed her wand at him, and felt only a faint stirring of regret at the shock on his face.

"Daughters?" he whispered.

"We love you, Father," said Parvati. "But we're going to Hogwarts this year."

Surprisingly, her father smiled, but Parvati found out the reason a moment later. "They'll send you back," he said confidently. "If a parent objects and doesn't want his son or daughter to attend, then the Headmistress is legally obligated to pull the student out of school."

"Oh, dear," Parvati murmured. "Padma, do you want to tell him, or should I?"

"I didn't manage to do it last time," said Padma distractedly, who was trying to find some way to hold her books so they wouldn't bang her chest when they whirled through the Floo connection. "You try."

Parvati nodded, never taking her eyes from their father's face. She *did* love him, really she did, but he just didn't *understand*. "When the student is seventeen," said Parvati, "and files the right legal paperwork, then he or she can stay in school. And we're seventeen, and Padma's already filed the paperwork. She did try to tell you she'd do that if you said no, but you kept thinking of us as little children, and underestimated her." She leaned against her sister's back, eyes alert in case their father reached for his wand. After the intensive dueling training she'd undergone, Parvati was sure she'd be quick enough to blast it out of his hand with an *Expelliarmus*.

"What have we done?" Rama whispered, his voice full of mourning and his eyes full of tears. "Where did we fail you, that you thought you had to run away?"

"You didn't fail us," said Parvati. She was actually glad their father had caught them, now. She had wanted to say this, but she couldn't have done it during the arguments without alerting their parents to their plans. "You just didn't have to make the choices we did. So now we've made those choices. And we'll see you again someday." She paused, and then Gryffindor honesty compelled her to add, "Probably."

Rama lunged forward.

But Padma had finally figured out how she wanted to arrange her books, and she grabbed Parvati's hand, while shouting out, "Hogwarts hospital wing!"

They got whirled through the intense, dizzying motion that always made Parvati feel sick to her stomach, and left her on her knees when they tumbled out on the floor of the hospital wing, with soot all over her robes. She climbed back to her feet, coughing, while Padma rushed over to a shocked-looking Madam Pomfrey, already drawing out their copy of the paperwork they'd filed.

"Madam Pomfrey," she said, words tumbling over each other, "Parvati and I are seventeen, and we ask for sanctuary—"

Parvati rolled out of the way when her father came through the Floo connection then, and reacted as she'd been trained before she even thought about what she was doing. Her father sprawled on the floor in a Body-Bind, unable even to blink, and certainly unable to interfere as Madam Pomfrey, who counted as a teacher of the school for the purposes of this legal discussion, slowly listened to and then accepted Padma's plea for sanctuary.

Parvati smugly let her father go. Rama rubbed his jaw, which he'd hit on the floor, with a wince, and then shook his head.

"What am I going to tell your mother?" he murmured.

"The truth," said Parvati, and kissed him on the cheek. "We're doing this for love. I hope we can visit you over Christmas

holidays, Father. Farewell.”

She followed Padma out of the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey would carry their paperwork to the Headmistress, so they didn't have to see her. Parvati was glad. She had someone she wanted to find.

Even before she could use the *Point Me* spell, though, a familiar voice called, “Parvati?” The tone was one of both surprise and joy.

She smiled, and looked up, and then flung herself headlong into Connor's arms, clinging fiercely to him.

My parents made their choice, and we made ours.

Minerva shook her head, but in amusement, as she studied the Patil twins' request for sanctuary and to attend the school that term. It was the fifth one she'd received, the third one from the children of a Light pureblood family. *Strange that so many children are less afraid than their parents are.*

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Poppy,” she said, with a firm nod, and then put the parchment on her desk. Poppy hovered instead of leaving, however, and Minerva glanced at her, wondering what she wanted.

“Minerva,” Poppy began in the voice that made her sound most like an interfering busybody, “have you been performing those spells I talked about, and taking the period of relaxation I mandated each day?”

Not this again. “I assure you,” said Minerva, her voice much cooler because she couldn't help it, “my heart was only temporarily weakened as a result of Severus's unfortunate possession accident. I am *not* an invalid. Nor am I someone who needs to watch her heart, Poppy. I am only in my seventies. I could easily live eighty years more.”

“You had a weak heart even before this,” the interfering matron insisted. “I *know* you did, Minerva. I've seen the records from that time in your fifth year when you collapsed after stopping those Slytherin boys from torturing that Hufflepuff girl—“

Minerva snorted. “I was overexcited, and I'd cast twenty spells in swift succession. I think I'm excused some exhaustion.” *And if I'd managed to figure out that those boys were under Tom Riddle's control at the time, then certain mysteries might have been solved much more easily.* She hadn't had the chance to figure it out, though, because she'd spent the next week in bed under Madam Balmbane's care, forced to endure spell after spell to heal her “weak heart.” *There* had been a busybody.

Poppy refused to back down. “You're not as young as you used to be, and the students need you. I want you to promise me that you'll use those spells and take some time to relax each day, Minerva, or I swear to Merlin, you'll be sleeping in the hospital wing until you do.”

Minerva leveled her best glare at Poppy. The other woman glared back, which Minerva had to admit impressed her more than a little. Her best stare had been known to stop Severus in full bark.

“I'll use them, then,” she said. “But I still don't think there's anything wrong.” That was as conciliating as she could be. She had tremendous sympathy for her Gryffindors, and Harry, who'd spent more than their fair share of time in the hospital wing under Poppy's tyranny. There were always more *important* things to be done than this endless worrying over one's health. Some worrying was good, of course, but it should not be incessant.

Poppy eyed her once, then nodded and left. Minerva defiantly changed into a cat and padded over to the wall of her office, staring up at the glass case that contained the Sword of Gryffindor.

They hadn't moved the Horcrux, and nothing had happened concerning it. When Minerva had handled it, it didn't burn her, and she felt nothing more than a faint tingle from the hilt, a tingle that told of immense magic—but that could have come from the age of the Sword. And of course they hadn't yet decided what they were going to do about it.

“I hate that he corrupted one of my mementoes,” muttered a voice behind her.

Minerva lashed her tail in acknowledgment of Godric's presence, but didn't turn around. Sometimes she thought that she could melt the Sword to slag by the sheer force of her stare. It was worth a try, at least.

“Of course, it was either the Sword or the Sorting Hat,” the shade of the Gryffindor Founder went on in a thoughtful voice, taking

a seat on the edge of the desk. “Those are the only possessions of mine that survive. And, all things considered, I’d rather it was the Sword, which almost no one handles, than the Hat, which peers into thousands of impressionable young minds.”

Minerva turned about, her head cocked. Though she couldn’t speak aloud in this form, the connection between the Headmistress and the shades of the Founders ran deep, and Godric sensed what she wanted to ask without words.

“I think it’s relics of the Founders that he wanted to corrupt,” said Godric. He put out a hand in invitation, and Minerva bounded up, landing on the desk beside him. His hand felt like a cool breeze as it moved along her spine, just enough to tickle. “My Sword, Salazar’s locket—and a ring that belongs to his descendants, too—and Helga’s cup. And I would wager anything I still own, which admittedly isn’t much, that the wand was Rowena’s.”

Minerva purred in consideration. It did make sense, though the diary that Harry had destroyed in his second year didn’t fit the pattern. But possibly the diary had meant something to Tom in his childhood years.

“And Poppy’s right, you know,” Godric continued, so smoothly that Minerva actually arched her back against his hand before she realized what he was talking about. She drew back and stared at him in betrayal, but it seemed that her stare was losing its effectiveness all around. “You need to be more careful of your heart. Leading from the back isn’t a bad thing, Minerva, as Rowena has told me on more than one occasion. You can still use your brains, even as you protect your body.”

Minerva lashed her tail, and gave him another stare to convey what she thought of that. She was a Gryffindor. They were *made* to fight from the front. It was certainly what she’d done during the First War.

Godric chuckled and scooped her into his lap, concentrating hard to solidify his arms and legs so that he could. “But this is the Second War, and this is different,” he whispered into her ear. “It’s all right, Minerva, to admit that you have weaknesses and that you’re human, too, you know.”

Possible, but annoying. Minerva dug in her claws and leaped off the desk and his lap, landing on the floor. Then she changed back to her normal self, and folded her arms. “I kept the school open against the pressure of the governors and the Ministry wanting me to close it.”

“You did,” said Godric, a curious expression on his face, as if he didn’t know where she was going.

“I’ve stood up for my students when Voldemort came, when Albus turned out to be a disgrace to the name of Gryffindor and the name of Light wizard, and when other students acted in a disgusting manner towards them.”

“Of course you have.”

“And you want me to back down and lead from behind now?” Minerva shook her head, unable to explain why this was so important to her, but knowing that it was. “When that works better, I may do it, but I won’t do it all the time, merely to preserve my health. My health is *fine*.” And it was. The war had given her back a sense of purpose and restlessness that kept her better-prepared to go forward than the apathy that she saw gripping many in the Ministry and general population.

Godric looked at her with soft eyes and a faint smile. Minerva found the expression on his face familiar, but she couldn’t place it.

“Very well, Minerva,” he said quietly. “As you need to.”

It was only later, as she walked down the stairs towards the Great Hall with the Sorting Hat tucked firmly under her arm, snorting and mumbling as it tried out its new songs, that she realized it was the same expression that she had often worn when she looked at her more impetuous and rule-breaking Gryffindors.

Hermione looked down the table and rolled her eyes. Parvati and Connor hadn’t stopped *snogging* since they entered the Great Hall. And of course that was all right, that was even to be expected since Connor hadn’t seen her most of the summer, but really, more than a minute with tongue was as much as anyone needed. And now there were children present, the straggling group of first-years lined up expectantly before the Sorting Hat.

Never mind that there were only sixteen first-years there, since most of their parents were too frightened to send them to the school. That only made it all the more imperative, in Hermione’s eyes, not to frighten them off now, or make them think the older students did nothing but snog. Their eyes were already wide, darting from every corner of the room back to the tables and the enchanted ceiling, and they kept swallowing as if to keep their mouths dry. Hermione smiled a little wistfully, remembering how

she'd felt when she came here for the first time.

She'd been nervous, a bit, but she'd read all the books already, and she knew what Hogwarts was like. The biggest challenge had been arguing with the Sorting Hat, which wanted her to go into Ravenclaw, when Hermione had *known* she wanted to go into Gryffindor. The Hat had finally given up and put her where she wanted to go rather than where, it had insisted, she belonged. Hermione was not about to listen to a hat, though. Books were far smarter, and the way the books described Gryffindor House had made her know it was the one for her.

"They look frightened," a voice murmured from behind her, and Hermione leaned back into Zacharias's arms.

"They're young," she said.

Zacharias sat down next to her, one arm securely around her shoulders. "I was never that nervous."

Hermione had to shrug. "Neither was I."

Zacharias gave her a smug glance from the corner of his eye. "No competition in this group, then."

And *that* was so ridiculous that Hermione just had to laugh, which made Professor Snape glare at her as he led the first first-year, whose name Hermione thought was Amanda Bailey, up to the Sorting Hat. "I think we can find other people to be superior to besides a group of first-years, Zach," she whispered, using the nickname she knew he hated.

He drew back from her, nostrils flaring, but his attempt to say something was cut short by the Hat's shout of, "SLYTHERIN!"

Hermione turned back around, eyebrows raised, as the tiny Bailey girl pulled the Hat off her head and tottered towards the Slytherin table. The small group of older students sitting there welcomed her enthusiastically, even if the loudest clapping was Harry and Draco's. Bailey, Hermione knew, was not a pureblood name. The girl was either Muggleborn, or, at best, the daughter of a pureblood witch who'd married a Muggle.

From the look on Harry's face, he did realize that, and he was going to fight for Amanda Bailey's right to be treated like an equal if he had to.

The first-year after that, a boy named Gerald, went to the Ravenclaw table, and then came Lionel, who, appropriately enough, became a Gryffindor. Then Hufflepuff acquired two new Housemates, and there were two first-year Gryffindor girls, whom Hermione smiled welcomingly at as they sat down at the very end of the table.

The rest of the first-years went to Slytherin.

Hermione knew her own eyes were wide, but she had never heard of Slytherin dominating such a large share of the Sorting before. Of course, it was a small Sorting, but Slytherin was the smallest of the Houses. Many students in recent years had heard of the House's dark reputation and fought with the Hat if it wanted to put them there. Not to mention that the qualities necessary for Slytherin were less likely to exist in eleven-year-olds than in older children, Hermione thought, unless the children were purebloods.

And now—

Now that seemed to have changed.

Hermione wasn't deaf, and she'd cast a few listening charms out of curiosity. Two of the younger girls on whom the Hat wavered, unsure whether to put them in Slytherin or another House, begged to be Sorted into Slytherin. So did a boy Hermione was almost sure was Muggleborn, and one of the Hufflepuff boys was almost in tears when the Hat decided on that House, though he tried to smile bravely as the others welcomed him in with loud clapping.

Hermione looked at Professor Snape's face. It shone like the sun, at least if one knew the signs to look for. Hermione did, having seen him look like that over Harry, and sometimes when a Slytherin completed a potion in his class perfectly.

The tide's turned, Hermione thought. Slytherin looks better now, its reputation is rising, and there might even be people out there who are trying to emulate its qualities, or who are teaching their children to do that. They've had at least a few years now, from the time that they found out about Dumbledore's child abuse and Harry started becoming famous. And then there's the Grand Unified Theory, saying that families don't have to keep apart because of silly blood laws anymore.

She was sure that was what was happening. From the look on Draco's face, he'd decided the same thing, and he hunched over a few of the first-years like a dragon smugly brooding on eggs. Hermione was sure she detected some coolness in his manner towards the Muggleborn students, but not nearly as much as there would have been a very short time ago.

So many things are changing, Hermione thought in wonder. *If we survive the War, if Voldemort doesn't win, then the wizarding world is going to change so much. For house elves, but for Muggleborns, too.*

"Hermione?"

"Hmmm?" Hermione turned from her contemplations to find Zacharias leaning forward, his eyes fastened intently on her face.

"My mother sent me with a message for you," said Zacharias solemnly, and then drew out a wooden case from his robes and handed it over to her with a little bow. Hermione accepted it and uncapped it, rolling out the scroll that had been cooped up inside. When she studied it, she felt a sudden prickling at the back of her eyes that felt too much like tears for comfort.

September 1st, 1997

Dear Hermione:

I beg you to forgive a stubborn old woman for taking too long to see the truth. I raised my son. I should have known that his choice would not alight on an unworthy partner, however surprising she was at first glance. Zacharias has told me of your courage and your determination to make a difference at Hogwarts this summer, and I have heard other tales from the wider wizarding world. The wizards and witches who join the war effort and forsake the foolish things that the Ministry asks of them are as likely to be Muggleborn as pureblood. In fact, to my shame and sorrow, they are more likely to be Muggleborn than pureblood, because they do not see themselves as bound to an old and outworn definition of Light.

You are a fit partner for my son, in intelligence and in courage. If I still wish for a different family background for you, it must come from my own personal dreams for Zacharias and not because of a deficiency in you. Welcome to our family, Hermione, whenever you decide to join it.

*Yours,
Miriam Smith.*

Hermione tried to say something, and had to swallow first. "When she decides to apologize, she doesn't do it halfway, does she?" she murmured, leaning against Zacharias's chest.

"Does that mean that you accept the apology?" Zacharias asked, stroking her shoulders.

"Yes," Hermione whispered.

"Good," said Zacharias, and his voice grew pompous. "You'll need to write out the acceptance, though. That's the proper way to do such things."

Hermione punched him in the shoulder, and then turned to face the head table as McGonagall rose to her feet. Her face was stern, but she could not help sneaking glances at the Slytherin table, either, and Hermione could make out the pride and satisfaction in her eyes.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts, new students and old, professors and staff," said McGonagall. "We are in the middle of a war now, and that will mean some changes. For example, stronger wards than normal have been established around the House common rooms. No student in first or second year is to go anywhere alone, and there are wards denying anyone but a few select people access to the Forbidden Forest." Her gaze touched Harry, then, and not by accident, Hermione thought. "In addition, defensive techniques will be taught in most classes, not simply Defense Against the Dark Arts, and all students are encouraged to learn the school's geography as soon as possible."

She leaned forward and put her hands on the table, drawing all attention irrevocably to her.

"We will win this war," she said. "And not solely for the sake of what will happen should we not. Because we must not allow fear to control our lives." She drew back and revealed that her wand had been lying under her palm. "*Animales advoco!*"

A stream of colored sparks sped out across the hall, touching the walls and rebounding from them, crisscrossing in midair and falling back together. Hermione gasped as she saw them forming into the shape of four beasts: a lion and badger walking side by side, a snake coiling around their feet and rearing upwards, an eagle descending from above to meet them. When they met, they

opened their mouths and uttered a soundless cry before bleeding back into a storm of sparks that raced to the torches lighting the Great Hall and made them flare wildly.

“This war shall not strip our lives from us,” said Headmistress McGonagall, her eyes narrow and her face shining with readiness to meet battle. At that moment, Hermione would have followed her into that battle. “Neither the more complex pleasures of House unity, nor—“ she smiled “—the simpler ones of eating.” She raised one hand, and the plates filled with food.

Hermione set about Transfiguring her own, noticing that Connor and Parvati, and, of course, Harry, were doing the same thing. Draco gave Harry’s conjured food a few thoughtful glances, chewing solemnly on his, but didn’t yet offer to forsake the services of house elves.

Hermione actually had to take a few calming breaths before she could eat. The excitement was twisting her stomach into a knot.

We’re going to live. We’re going to fight on a basis that Voldemort can’t even comprehend.

And we’re going to win.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: In the Shadow of His Power

“And what is your main conclusion from your visit?”

“Acting Minister Juniper is an idiot.”

Monika had long since learned to control her face. She was often grateful for that skill, but this was one of the most violent bouts of gratitude she’d had in some time. Otherwise, she would have laughed at Evamaria’s statement, and that would not have suited the grave image she needed to present.

As it was, she inclined her head slowly, and did not even shift the position of the one hand that rested on the table in the Minister’s office. Evamaria stood at the window with her back to the Dark Lady, examining the enchanted view of dark forests and a glacier-fed lake. Only a slight tension in her shoulders showed how nervous Monika’s magic made her. Evamaria made Monika more content than any of her servants had in some time. She struck the right balance between serving their country abroad and being Monika’s servant at home.

“He is, my Lady.” Evamaria turned around and shook her head. Her neck looked slender enough to snap like a twig, but Monika knew many people who had thought that about dear Evamaria. They’d been roundly disabused of what they should already have known, every one, when they tangled with her. It sounded as though Juniper had allowed himself to be taken in completely, however. “He treated me like a child when I questioned him. He claims to want the International Confederation’s help to protect his country from the discovery of Muggles, but he rejects the most common-sense measures, such as to concentrate on the largest disruptions and leave the small ones alone, or work with the Muggle government to provide what plausible excuses they can for some breaches in the wall. He wants nothing less than complete Obliviation of *all* Muggles who have seen something suspicious in the last few months.” Evamaria let out an exasperated breath and writhed her fingers into a knot, then rested the knot on the back of her neck. “All or nothing. And he wants the same thing of Harry.”

Monika nodded. In truth, she was more interested in what Evamaria would say of Harry than of the Acting Minister. But she had not sent her servant to Britain with only that purpose—Evamaria might mistake her Lady’s interest for fear—so she could not look more excited about one piece of news than the other. “And what is your impression of Harry *vates*?”

“I did not meet him, of course.” Evamaria shifted restlessly, as if that were a failure on her part. Monika understood that the Acting Minister’s invited friend would hardly have been welcome at Hogwarts, though, and nodded her understanding. When her servants made their best effort, she could forgive them their shortcomings. “But from the impression I had of him through the Acting Minister, he is a competent, powerful wizard hampered more by others’ perceptions of him and the Dark Lord’s personal enmity than by his age or the difficulties Juniper wanted to ascribe to him. I am sure he has faults. I could not come at them based on what his enemies said about him, however.”

Monika nodded again. That was not truly unusual for a Lord or Lady. Those who had never met her said very contradictory things of her, too.

But what did it mean?

She knew what it meant for her own purposes, and that was really all that mattered.

“Thank you, Evamaria,” she said, rising to her feet. “I will contact you again when I need you.”

Evamaria bowed deeply as she Apparated away from the room. The Ministers of Austria had not always been such good friends to Monika, but she had taught the ones who were not, often removing them from office. Evamaria took her natural submission to Monika’s power in good part.

Monika reappeared next to her home, and held up a hand as the *avis-serpens* came coiling down to her. She had not decided how many legs it should have yet, two like its bird parent or none like its snake parent, and so for the moment, it had one as a compromise. It perched on her wrist, shifting awkwardly back and forth, using the tail to compensate for its balance.

She stroked the sharp scale-feathers, and smiled into the distance.

There is a young Lord, heir to the most powerful wizard in the world, battling foes on all sides. He will survive, according to the prophecy, and inherit that power. But he will be reeling, off-guard after such a large battle, and he will receive no legal protection from his own Ministry than might make a case of interference problematic.

I will wait until after that battle, and claim the magic that no child should be carrying then.

That decided, she went to check on the progress of the mating she’d arranged that morning, between one of her tentacled sheep and dear Liane’s sister. Liane had failed her most spectacularly, and such things had to be punished.

Indigena did not recognize the pattern sketched on the floor.

She recognized the material it was made of, of course. Since the failed attempt to kill Remus Lupin, her Lord seemed to be obsessed with growing ever stronger. He had sent Sylvan and Oaken to capture what straying wizards they could, and a few other Death Eaters who had more knowledge of the Muggle world to snare those Muggleborn children too young to be missed. They were brought back to him. Voldemort drained their magic, and his power grew stronger still, a brooding shadow that spread around him like a pair of constantly-flared eagles’ wings.

Then they were left with the bodies of the new Squibs. Voldemort gave them to Sylvan and Oaken, with very specific instructions. And the bodies came back out as rendered flesh and blood, poured as thick liquid into the design that Voldemort wanted, and then dried and frozen and enchanted to stay in place. The victims’ own pain and suffering probably also helped with that, Indigena thought. Though willing sacrifice was stronger, even unwilling sacrifice—blood magic—had power.

The design was not yet complete, but its outer form was a huge circle. In the middle, innumerable knots and stars and lines crossed to form a pattern that Indigena could not penetrate or understand. Sometimes she saw darting shapes in it, a bird, a lizard, a snake, but those were more likely her eyes trying to make sense of the changeable, she thought, like the shapes one saw when peering into a fire.

So her Lord’s ultimate purpose, other than gaining more magic, remained mysterious, but this evening Indigena had noticed a new thing. As her Lord stood in front of the pattern, something joined him.

It was a glint, a glimmer of shadow at first. Then it resolved, and Indigena made out a black stone woman carrying her head under her arm. The head writhed with snakes. Indigena quickly looked aside, making sure not to meet that head’s eyes.

Of course, more dangerous than the possible Medusa magic of that head was the sense of might that lurked around it. And by the chaos that accompanied it, clawing at the burrow walls and making streams of dirt fall from them, Indigena knew what this creature of Dark magic really was: a cover for the wild Dark.

It walked around the pattern with Voldemort, and, when it reached a certain point in the outer ring that corresponded to a blank place in the center, it vanished. Her Lord gave no sign that he had noticed.

Indigena bowed her head. *If he is calling upon the wild Dark, and draining magic at the same time, what can he be planning?*

She decided that he was unlikely to tell her if he had not so far, and in any case, it was not her task to prevent that. Her eyes focused across the room, where Sylvan and Oaken were dragging in another victim.

There is my task.

She turned and left the burrow. Her Lord had gone deep into contemplation, and was unlikely to call her back. She mounted the steps to the surface, and then cast a complicated spell on one of the stones in the tumble-down wall also woven with anti-Apparition spells and dense wards.

Little by little, she was altering the stone to have a heartbeat, and sing. It caused an immense amount of magic to leak above the wards, if one knew what to look for. Indigena had chosen it as the spell most likely to work as a summons and not attract attention. If her Lord asked, Indigena knew at least two uses the spell could be put to on prisoners, and could say she was practicing for those, trying to get over her squeamishness about torture.

But its main purpose was as a call.

And, tonight, it finally worked.

Indigena caught a glimpse of movement that resembled the wild Dark's, and looked up at once. Evan Rosier stood not far beyond the wall, staring at her, clutching the Hufflepuff cup in one hand.

Indigena cocked an eyebrow and murmured. At Evan's feet, a tendril rose, uncurled, and laid a message at his boots.

Now it remained to be seen if he would read it or not.

But Indigena could not stay to see. Her Mark was burning. She turned and went below.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Look to the Future

Harry slid carefully into the room. There was always the chance that Draco would notice him, of course, and—

“Expelliarmus!”

And he had noticed Harry *much more quickly* than he had last time. Harry ducked, spinning to the floor. He was impressed. It really wasn't Draco's fault that that spell didn't work against him, since he didn't use a wand much anymore. It would have worked on a Death Eater who thought that Draco was thoroughly distracted casting against the wooden, wizard-shaped target on the far side of the dueling room.

Draco snorted when he saw it was Harry, but didn't let up on the curses he was casting. *“Dolor immoderatus! Aere alieno demersus! Caligo auriculam!”*

Harry dodged, in order, a pain curse, a hex that would transfer any life debt he owed another wizard to Draco, and one that would unbalance him by causing intense dizziness in his inner ear. He couldn't catch his breath, but what little he could spare was given to laughter. Draco was *wonderful*.

“Hold still, will you?” Draco muttered, and paused a moment to catch his breath.

Harry raised an eyebrow and made him pay for that, hauling him into the air by one heel with *Levicorpus*. Unlike last time, however, Draco remained calm, and cast *Finite Incantatem*, even though that came near dropping him on his head. He let out a little *oomph* as his shoulders were bruised.

Harry didn't know how he got a grip on his wand, rolling on the floor like that, but it was obvious he'd used a non-verbal spell when Harry felt a tightness like a vine growing along and up his legs. He concentrated, willing the vine to wither away from him and collapse to the floor, and then Draco cast the Ear-Dazzle Curse again and made him reel, crashing down.

“In a real battle, you would have been dead,” Draco gloated from somewhere above him.

“Not dead, but inconvenienced,” Harry muttered, and did what he should have done in the first place, casting a nonverbal *Finite Incantatem* to end both spells. He smiled at Draco. “I got caught up in finishing them in some flashy way, and allowed you to get a hit in. Well done.”

Draco's chest was moving fast, and his eyes practically sparked with passion. Harry wasn't surprised when he leaned forward and

took his mouth in a hungry kiss. He returned it for a moment, then drew back with a shake of his head.

“I came to test you, yes, but also to fetch you for dinner—“ he began.

Draco, who was kneeling down in front of him, didn't seem inclined to listen. His half-smile wasn't an expression Harry had seen before. He unbuckled Harry's trousers without listening to him.

“Draco?”

“Were you saying something?” Draco braced his legs on the floor and kicked hard, and Harry found himself on his back with Draco on top of him. “Was it important?” Draco added, and then lowered his head towards that horrible, evil spot on the side of Harry's neck.

“Draco Malfoy, you had better not bite—“

Draco didn't listen to him, and did. Harry arched his neck, panting. The unlocked door and dinner not far away were thoughts drifting somewhere in the back of his mind, but they couldn't make it to the front, not when Draco was rather insistently dragging his trousers off and reaching into his pants.

“Defeating me excites you?” Harry managed to mutter.

“*Excitement* excites me,” Draco corrected, and then bent down and took Harry's cock in his mouth.

Harry started; even with the bite on his neck and Draco's obvious intentions, he had anticipated a little more foreplay. But the warmth and the wetness and the way Draco sucked at him wildly, fiercely, the same way he had gone into battle, melted his objections soon enough.

He tried to protest, which was the valiant thing to do. Someone could come in at any moment. They really needed to eat, and then go back to their bedroom, and then he needed to research the Horcruxes some more, because he didn't think they could put off going after the ring for much longer—

And then Draco's tongue curled in a way that made shivers run through his body, and brought currents of laughter streaming up from his soul. Harry felt the same giddy excitement grip his mind that usually took over for him during sex. He kept his hips on the floor by main force of effort.

“Come on, Harry,” Draco muttered, and somehow breathed out air and sucked inward at the same time.

Harry knew what Draco was asking for—for him to stop holding back, and let his body do what it wanted—and hesitated only a moment longer before giving in. His hips bucked a few more times, and Harry didn't try to keep them still. He felt the pleasure rushing through his body, building far too quickly for most of their encounters, but this was spontaneous and unplanned, and that was the point.

And then it felt too good, and he *couldn't*, and he came with an embarrassing combination of grunt and sigh. He could feel Draco's smugness radiating off him like summer sunlight.

Draco pulled away a moment later, and cast a locking spell in the direction of the door. He then took off his shirt, never removing his eyes from Harry's face.

Harry smiled and lunged up, kissing him fiercely. *Dinner can wait.*

“Harry, if you would come with me, please.”

Harry stopped in surprise as McGonagall gave him the invitation. She never looked at him as she swept past, her robes billowing behind her, and kept walking as if she expected him to follow her to her office. Harry glanced at Draco, whose face simply firmed with determination to come with him in turn.

Harry shrugged, and trailed McGonagall to the gargoyle. When the Headmistress turned and saw Draco with him, she paused, but then tilted her chin down and murmured something that sounded like, “In any discussion that concerns your future, I suppose Mr. Malfoy has a right to be present.”

Has she decided against continuing her support of me? The pressure from the Ministry and parents might have become too much, Harry thought, and squared his shoulders. It would be hard to be deprived of the protection of Hogwarts, but he could make Silver-Mirror his stronghold if he must. He *was* sure that McGonagall would never turn out the students and the refugees who had come to her, no matter what she might have to do to Harry.

They reached the office, and McGonagall sat behind the desk, with one glance at the Sword of Gryffindor. Harry took one of the chairs in front of the desk, giving a substantial glare of his own at the Horcrux. He still did not know whom they would find to walk onto the sword.

Besides me.

Harry knew he had the will and the courage to do such a thing, if worst came to worst. He didn't *want* to, and at the moment it seemed unlikely he would be the sacrifice, because he was needed to fight the shards of soul and drain the magic of the other Horcruxes. But he could do it if he needed to.

"Harry."

He paid attention to McGonagall, who had a sheaf of paper in her hands and her glasses pushed up on her nose. She studied the parchment in front of her for a moment, then directed his attention to him.

"Have you thought about what you're going to do after Hogwarts?" she asked briskly.

Harry felt his mouth sag open. "What?" he asked.

Draco nudged him with an elbow. "She's asking what you want to do after the war, idiot," he said.

"I *know* that," said Harry, though he wasn't sure he had; his mind was still too blank with surprise to make up a good excuse. "I just—you know what it's going to be like, Madam. Working as a *vates*. Trying to repair the ravages that I'm sure this war will inflict on Britain, and the ravages it's already inflicted. Making peace with the Ministry, and the new Minister I hope is in place after Juniper. What else would it be like?"

"In truth, Harry, I did not wish to see you confined." McGonagall laid down the parchment and leaned forward. "If that is truly what you want to spend the rest of your life doing, I honor you. But is it? Are there other ambitions that you would like to achieve, and what are they? I feel that I may be able to give you some advice on those."

Draco's arm hooked around his waist. "He'll be living with me, of course," he said. "I always intend to be part of Harry's life."

Harry felt his face flush. Expressing physical affection like this was one thing in private, or in front of someone who knew all about it already, like Snape. But Draco's reply to the Headmistress could be seen as cheek.

McGonagall didn't appear to have taken it as that, this time. She simply nodded. "That is quite clear by now, Mr. Malfoy," she murmured. "If I am not mistaken, your seventh joining ritual will occur on Halloween, and after that, no one else can intervene to court one of you, or part you."

"The magic will make them sorry if they do." Draco was smirking fit to tear the world apart.

Harry felt his flush deepen. *Does everyone have to know all these details about us?* But he said, "Of course I'll be living with Draco. But—there's nothing else I want, Madam. Nothing else I can think of. I appreciate your talking to me about this, but I already know what the rest of my life is going to be like." He still couldn't quite contain his bewilderment. Why wouldn't Snape have been the one to say these things, if anyone was going to? And was McGonagall seriously suggesting that he could simply settle into a quiet job somewhere in England and live that way? It was ridiculous. His magic would always mark him out, and so would his compulsion to help other people as long as he could. Harry hoped that need would continue to exist for a good portion of time after his battle with Voldemort.

McGonagall smiled at him as if he had said something at once wise and amusing. "No one knows what the rest of her life is going to be like, Harry. Do not dismiss some other choices so quickly." She pushed the parchment she'd been holding across the desk to him. "This is a list of requirements for becoming an Auror—or a spell inventor—in other countries, as well as some other careers that require both immense magic and a flexible mind. If any of them strike your fancy, Harry, do let me know, and I can procure you more information on them."

Harry slowly took the list. *This is so strange. I'll be grateful just to survive the war, and she wants me to be—what?*

“Why, Madam?” he asked quietly, eyes on her.

“I wanted to be sure that you were looking to the future and thinking about surviving it,” said McGonagall serenely. “It seems that you are. And if you do change your mind, or wish to know what else you can be beyond a *vates*, there is the list.” She nodded to it. “Do not be mistaken, Harry. What you are, what you plan to be, is wonderful. But chaining yourself to one duty for the rest of your life is problematic, a reflection of what your parents tried to persuade you into when they trained you to serve Connor. I would not see that happen again.”

“It won’t,” said Draco, his voice strong as a windstorm. “I promise, Headmistress.”

“I am glad that he has you, Mr. Malfoy,” said McGonagall—McGonagall, who usually showed distaste or dislike for Draco.

Harry let himself be pulled into a hug from Draco, but his surprise still soaked him so much that he couldn’t truly respond. *What is going on? Did everyone decide to play a grand joke, and no one told me?*

I just—I would expect concern like this from Snape or Regulus or even Peter, but not McGonagall. She didn’t need to.

“Thank you, Madam,” he said, because there didn’t seem to be anything else to say, and left the office in a daze of confusion. Draco had to steady him so that he didn’t take a headlong dive down the moving staircase. He was busy trying to figure out why McGonagall would care, would make such an effort.

Isn’t what I’m going to become obvious, an extension of what I already am?

Connor gave the door to the Slytherin common room the password that Harry had told him yesterday, and ignored the shocked glances of several people inside when he stepped through. He had the Marauder’s Map firmly in hand. While some of the secret passages on it were unusable—too dangerous, or too far from the House common rooms—others would serve well as escape tunnels from the school, should they ever need them.

He paused when he reached the door of the bedroom Draco and Harry shared. For one thing, the handle glimmered with a powerful locking spell. For another, there were loud, if muffled, moans coming from inside.

Hmmm. Connor doubted he would have time to come back later, since his Defense Against the Dark Arts homework was already enough to keep him occupied half the night. Besides, the looks on the Slytherins’ faces made him think that they’d probably change the password after he left. And, finally, he wanted to see his brother. He hadn’t had the chance to talk to him in several days.

He pulled out his wand and murmured a *Finite*, though he had to repeat it several times before the charm sparked and faded into nothingness. Connor smiled triumphantly. It was Draco’s spell, then, and not Harry’s, or he doubted he could get through it.

He opened the door, one hand in front of his eyes, and called out, “Shield yourselves! There are some things I *don’t* want to see.”

He heard two yelps, or perhaps it was one yelp and one grunt as someone got kicked in a sensitive place. Connor grinned behind his hand, and waited until the sounds of scrambling and rustling cloth stopped.

“*Potter*,” said Draco, in a tone of high disgust.

“Malfoy,” Connor retorted, lowering his hand. To his relief, Harry was dressed, and trying to lean casually against the bed while very red in the face. Draco lay under the sheets. Connor didn’t know, and didn’t care to, how naked he was under them. “Harry, I wanted to talk to you about the tunnels that we discussed, the ones that will be necessary if Voldemort ever attacks the school.”

Harry’s face cleared, and he nodded. “Do you mind, Draco?” he murmured.

“It doesn’t really matter if I do or not, does it?” Draco muttered, burying his head beneath the blankets. “The mood’s entirely *broken*, and you’re about to run away with your brother anyway. I know that look.”

“Don’t pout,” said Harry, with crispness Connor couldn’t have imagined hearing from him a year ago, and kissed Draco on the cheek. “Go to sleep, if you want, or start on the Defense homework. I’ll be back shortly.”

Draco sulked, and gave Connor a decidedly evil look behind Harry's back as Harry crossed to the door. Connor pondered sticking out his tongue.

"Stop glaring at him, Draco," Harry said, without turning around. "And leave him alone, Connor." Gently, he shut the bedroom door behind them, and then shook his head. "You're just lucky that he's had one orgasm today already, or he would have cursed you," he said.

Connor felt his face turn red. "I didn't need to know that, Harry."

"Remember that the next time you burst in on us." Harry folded his arms. "Now, was the map just an excuse?"

"I need an excuse to spend time with you?" Connor clenched his hand on the map, interested in Harry's answer.

Harry blinked, and then his expression softened. "Of course not, Connor. But it also doesn't seem that urgent that you'd come bursting through the locking spell when you knew what had to be happening behind it."

"I think they might change the password on me," Connor said, with a glance over his shoulder at the Slytherin common room. "Besides, I already made the trek down to the dungeons." He gave his brother a winsome smile. "And I promise, I did want to spend time with you."

Harry smiled, and sat down on the top stair before the bedroom door, taking the Map. "Which tunnels were you thinking of using?"

"Not the one behind the statue of the humpbacked witch," said Connor at once. He'd spent a few days studying the Map, now, and felt himself rather an expert on it. "It goes out into Hogsmeade, and that would be as dangerous as Hogwarts if Voldemort was attacking, probably. And not the one on the second floor that winds up behind Hagrid's hut, for the same reason."

"I hear tunnels we can't use, not ones we can." Harry rustled the Map impatiently, watching as numerous tiny dots moved back and forth. Connor, looking down, accidentally caught a glimpse of two dots called *Zacharias* and *Hermione* moving towards the Hufflepuff common room. He looked away hastily.

"That's why I figured out these tunnels," he said, and then flicked his fingers over the Map, touching five of them. One each was located in Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Towers, one near Hufflepuff, and two under Slytherin. "They're not often used, because there are much shorter routes out onto the grounds. I don't think even the Marauders went into them more than once or twice. And of course they wouldn't want to walk all the way down from Gryffindor Tower only to go under the Slytherin dungeons and *then* find their way out in the opposite direction of the Forbidden Forest."

Harry frowned. Connor suspected that was because the tunnels ran beyond the limits of the Map, and he couldn't see where they went. "What is their destination?"

"Parvati sent a conjured light of hers to find out," said Connor. "And—well, it's not nearby, we know that much." He pulled out a Pensieve from his robe pocket and tapped it so that it came back to normal size. A single memory shimmered in the bottom, a dollop of silvery liquid. "This is what the light showed to her, and then she put the memory in here."

Harry bent and put his head into the memory, and Connor followed, even though he'd already seen it. It was an incredible journey, he had to admit that much, and he didn't think that wanting to see it again was a crime.

The ball of conjured light hovered next to the hidden entrance to the tunnel in Gryffindor Tower, a small crack between the stones. When Parvati's hand came briefly into sight and tugged at the crack, the wall opened. The light darted through and danced up and down for a moment, to show that the room just beyond the door was still big enough for a human.

Then it flew.

Connor kept down a whoop with an effort. This was rather like swooping on a Firebolt along a dizzying maze of tunnels, down and over and around. Sometimes the light took stairs, but not often. For the most part, the tunnel simply led steadily down, looping through the thick stone walls of the castle, and only once crossing with another—the corridor that led from Ravenclaw Tower.

Deeper and deeper they dived, and then the ball of light emerged into a dungeon corridor. Harry made a startled little noise. "I never knew there was an entrance to a tunnel there," he whispered.

“Not many people did,” Connor said. “Now watch. This is the most vulnerable part of the journey, I think, because we’d have to cross from one tunnel to another, and emerge into full sight, which is a problem if there are Death Eaters running around the school.”

The light sped fleetly across the floor and to another tiny crack in the stones. Connor knew the crack could tug open to become a door the same way that the original one had. He wondered if it was a coincidence, or maybe a good omen, that the holes were both shaped like lightning bolts if he squinted.

Down and over and around again, but this time the tunnel was damper and dived even more deeply than before, over stones that gleamed with wetness and thick burrows of mingled rock and earth that reminded Connor of ancient wizards’ dwellings he’d seen in his History of Magic textbook. At times the ceiling dropped alarmingly low, but there was always room to crawl. Connor didn’t look forward to having to urge claustrophobic people through those places if they ever used this as an escape route, though.

Then the sight of the tunnel gave way to a waterfall, a place where the lake had broken through the ceiling.

Harry started. “How are we supposed to pass that?” he demanded.

“It’s an illusion,” said Connor, smiling fondly as Parvati’s ball of light shot through the curtain of water, sending small drops scattering out to spray behind it. For a moment, blue and light closed them round, and then they were out on the other side, in a tunnel that, if not perfectly dry, was at least no more wet than before. “Think about it, Harry. If there was a breach that large in Hogwarts’s foundations, the school would have suffered trouble before now, wouldn’t it?”

Harry nodded reluctantly. Then he leaned forward as the ball of light sank into a pit. “Is there a ladder?”

“On the wall.” Connor pointed to the side of the memory, almost behind their heads, where the ball’s gleams showed glimpses of crude handholds carved into the stone long before.

Harry remained tense and silent, watching, as the pit expanded into another tunnel, and then an almost perfect ramp straight up. Soon it acquired the tendrils of climbing vines, and ducked past a massive influx of roots, and washed up into darkness and cold air.

“Where—“

“Beyond the Forbidden Forest,” Connor said. “And Hogwarts’s anti-Apparition wards, too. If we ever need to escape that way, we can Apparate to the safehouses once we’re out of it.”

Harry shook his head in wonder. Then his face hardened. “That kind of territory is natural habitat for Indigena’s more dangerous plants,” he muttered. “I’ll ask Neville to plant those lilies he’s been developing along the tunnel, so that if she tries to strike at us while we’re running, she can be turned.”

“And you’ll fill the corridor with traps and tricks?” Connor asked hopefully. This was the part he wanted to help with. Since it seemed disloyal to play pranks on anyone in the school anymore, he wanted to play them on the Death Eaters. He was sure the Weasley twins would also be glad to help.

“Of course,” said Harry. “But they’ll have to be calculated so that they won’t hinder our escape.”

Connor grinned. “For one thing,” he said, as they tugged their heads out of the silvery liquid, because the memory had ended save for the light’s flight back to Hogwarts, “we could have traps armed mostly to allow the passage of a large group of people, and then strike after a certain period of time at anyone who came after them. And I’m sure Fred and George can work with time-delayed charms and the direction of the tunnel and the House crests on Hogwarts robes.”

He reveled in the grateful look Harry gave him. It did seem that he had little enough time to spend with his brother after their parents’ funeral, even though he saw Harry at least once every few days, and more often than that now that classes had started again.

For a moment, Connor contemplated the fact that if their lives were different, they’d be worried mostly about NEWTs this year, and House rivalry, and Quidditch, and woes with their girlfriend and boyfriend. It sounded like a prosaic set of worries, and, in certain lights, Connor supposed, attractive.

But everything would have to be different for that to happen. Neither of them could be the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry couldn’t be as

powerful as he was magically. Voldemort would have to be dead already, because Connor was quite sure that they wouldn't be able to leave the war up to Neville or whoever else might be destined to defeat him. This was everyone's war, and as long as it existed, those ordinary teenage concerns were a long way from his mind, and Harry's.

Connor wouldn't have it any other way, though. Perhaps it was the Gryffindor in him. Perhaps, after thinking he was the Boy-Who-Lived for twelve years, he craved having attention focused on him. Perhaps he simply hated the idea of anything being ordinary for long. But he wanted to fight as much as he wanted to play pranks, and he wanted to be helping Harry when he could.

"I'm sure Fred and George *can* think of other things," Harry said, drawing Connor's attention back to their conversation. "But I can't, not right now. I'll speak to Neville and examine the tunnel tomorrow." He folded the Map and passed it back to Connor. "Don't worry about anyone changing the password. If they do, I'll just give you the new one—though I'm sure you could use your Gryffindor deviousness to lurk around until you hear it." He gave Connor a smile to let him know he was teasing. "Don't undo any locking spells on our door anymore, though."

Connor wasn't sure what made him regard his brother thoughtfully instead of simply accepting the Map and bouncing off. But he did, and he did ask the question that had started weighing, quietly, on him all throughout August. "Harry?"

"Hmmm?" About to open his bedroom door again, Harry paused and looked back at him.

"Why didn't you come and talk to me about what you felt when Lily and James died?" No dancing around the subject and beating about the bush for him, Connor had already decided. He was a Gryffindor. He could be as blunt and honest as he wanted, and that was only what people would expect of him.

Harry froze, and the cheerfulness died out of his face. Then he shook his head once. "Because you needed comfort then," he said. "Obviously. And I felt as though you were my only family member left. I wanted to protect you, not burden you."

"I *am* your only blood family left." Connor leaned forward. "And once I started recovering and stopped hating myself for my grief over them? Then why didn't you come and talk to me, Harry?"

"August was rather busy," said Harry dryly.

"Would you ever have?"

"No." Harry's mouth tightened.

"Why not?"

"I didn't want to."

"Why not?"

Harry looked away from him. "Because it was *mine*," he said lowly. "I just—I still haven't told Draco and Snape in detail, because I don't want them to judge me for the grief I displayed."

Connor made an exasperated noise, and kept himself from throwing up his hands only because he knew that someone from the Slytherin common room might be watching them. "And that was *exactly* why you comforted me, Harry, because I hated my grief and you had to tell me that it was all right for me to feel it. Why didn't you let me comfort you and tell you the same thing?"

"I had other things to do," said Harry, shifting restlessly. "The funeral to arrange. People to contact. Condolences to express for those other people who lost family members in the attack."

Connor stood and came up behind him. Harry turned to face him rather than let Connor approach his back, his arms folded and his face set and his eyes cold. He *did* do forbidding well, Connor thought.

But he didn't try words to break through that mask, because it was obvious that wouldn't work. He put his arms around Harry and hugged him instead. Harry only stood there, as if the embrace meant nothing to him, but Connor could feel the wary shifting in his muscles, and knew it took his brother a good deal of effort to keep from simply bolting back into the bedroom.

"I'm your brother, too," Connor murmured into his ear. "I know that you're my elder brother and my guardian and the tower of strength for me when I need you to be, Harry, but—I'm *also* your brother, you know? I can return the favor. It's a relationship between two of us, not just you doing things for me. I know Snape and Draco have finally managed to convince you to have a

relationship like that with them, mostly. I want one like that with you, too.”

“I assume you don’t want the potions-brewing part of the one or the sexual part of the other,” Harry muttered.

Connor burst out laughing before he could help himself, even though he recognized this as another tactic that Harry used to keep people from prying. “No,” he said, when he calmed down. “But I want to talk to you more often than I do, and not just about me or about defensive techniques either, Harry. I know you might not do it right away, but I’m still here, and I’ll talk to you sometimes.”

He gave him one more squeeze, then broke away and walked back towards the door out of the Slytherin common room.

Harry could be as distant and resentful as he liked. It didn’t matter. Connor would always be there to open the doors he kept himself behind, locking spells or not.

Though I sincerely hope not many sights as traumatic as Draco and him shagging are behind those doors.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty: A Nasty Surprise

Harry stared at the ceiling of their bed, stroking Draco’s back as he waited for him to wake up. It had become his habit to do this in the past few days. There was no other time when he could guarantee that he would think uninterrupted, even by such welcome interruptions as a kiss or a question from one of the younger Slytherin students about what it had been like to live in the House when he first came to Hogwarts.

He didn’t know the cause of Voldemort’s silence in the last half a month. He had been too grateful for the rest to question it at first; besides, he’d been sure that an attack would come at any moment. But now he feared it meant only that he was preparing some great, savage strike.

Before he can do that, we need to destroy a Horcrux.

Harry stirred restlessly, and then lay still again when Draco murmured. He drifted near the surface of sleep now, but he didn’t need to wake yet, and Harry wanted him to remain quiet for as long as he could. He’d been exhausting himself with training lately. He deserved all the rest he could get.

Nothing will really incapacitate Voldemort but destroying the Horcruxes. I know that. I can do all the defensive planning that I want, or even all the offensive planning, if I could locate him and his Death Eaters, and yet that won’t make him die or stop coming until the Horcruxes are destroyed. I have to.

I still haven’t found a way around the Unassailable Curse. I don’t think that Thomas and Jing-Xi will find a way around the one on the Sword, either. They still hadn’t managed to identify the spells that Voldemort had used by name, though they had found ones that did similar things. And so, no matter how much I hate the thought of someone dying for me, or in my name, I have to face that it’s going to happen.

Harry closed his eyes. Draco had stirred towards wakefulness again as he felt Harry shaking, but only uttered a sleepy little murmur and burrowed into his chest. Harry looked down at him and stroked his fingers through soft blond hair, his mind a torrent of conflicting emotions.

He didn’t want to cry, though, not unless he was so deeply alone that he knew no one would intrude. So he forced the tears down and made himself smile in case Draco’s eyes chose that moment to flutter open.

I want to live. And Merlin knows that Draco wants me to live. He would probably say it was selfish to want to die, in fact, when I have so many commitments that require me to live.

But it’s also selfish to ask my allies to do things that I won’t do. How can I ask someone else to destroy the Horcruxes through the willing sacrifice of life unless I’m willing to die myself?

But I can’t kill myself, because I need to be alive to insure that all the magic and the pieces of soul from the Horcruxes are destroyed.

But it’s still a price that I should be willing to pay.

His hand must have stroked a little too hard, because Draco suddenly looked up at him. “Harry? What’s wrong?” His voice was still thick with sleep.

“Nothing,” Harry lied easily, raising the cheerful mask that had become second nature to him in the last few days, as his worry over Voldemort’s inexplicable quietude grew stronger and stronger. Everyone else appeared to value the gap between attacks, and he should, too. If nothing else, it meant less death. “Are you almost ready to go to breakfast?”

“Hm. Have to?”

“No. A few more minutes yet.”

“Give me them.” One of Draco’s arms, which had been curled across his chest, shifted and wrapped around Harry. “Want to have as much as I can,” he muttered.

“Typical selfish Slytherin,” Harry whispered into his neck, but the emotion tightening his heart was anything but irritation. *He deserves to have as much as he can. Everyone does, but especially Draco—of life, of love, of magic, of time to lie in bed in the morning and wallow in warmth.*

I don’t know what I can do to both give him that and give our world the safety it needs, though.

Draco slowly leaned towards Harry. If he did it too suddenly, then Harry would notice and cover up the sheet of parchment he’d been scribbling on. Whatever it was, it wasn’t Arithmancy equations. Harry had never been that urgent in Arithmancy, an art that usually required more concentration than he could give it and a way of thinking in numbers that Harry hated on instinct.

He caught a glimpse of the word *ring* before Professor Vector swirled past with a murmur of, “Attend to your own paper please, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco sat back and paid attention to his paper, but now he thought he knew what Harry was writing. It would be a list of the remaining Horcruxes, and the costs of destroying them.

Draco could feel his stomach brewing like an anxious potion. He’d known that Harry had something on his mind when he woke that morning, but it seemed best to let it go when Harry denied it. Draco was trying to be open, to show Harry that he could trust him while not *pushing* him to do so.

This, though, was too serious to be left alone. If Harry was even thinking about going after the Horcruxes without help, then he needed to be confronted and talked out of that rabidly stupid idea.

Accordingly, Draco snared his bag with one hand after class as Harry distractedly shoved his books into it. “Harry?” he whispered. “Walk with me towards Ancient Runes?”

Harry nodded agreeably. Draco suspected he knew why. They would pass the library on the way to that class, and Harry could easily double back and towards research he had probably convinced himself he needed, or to visit Rhangnara and Jing-Xi.

They passed out of the usual flood of people that emerged from the class—except among a few people, like Draco, who had a natural talent for it, Professor Vector’s subject wasn’t that popular, and used mostly for career advancement—and into a side corridor. Draco had chosen it on purpose, so that he could talk to Harry without being overheard.

“Is something wrong?”

Harry’s eyes shone anxiously when Draco glanced sideways at him. He sighed. *I suppose I’m not the only one who can read someone and divine the secrets he’s holding back. Or some of the secrets, at least.*

He faced Harry and put a hand on his shoulder. “I want to know why you were writing about a ring,” he said.

Harry swallowed, but didn’t back down and didn’t look away, to Draco’s secret relief. He would have been sure that Harry already had a plan to take off on his own if he’d done either of those. “It was a list of the Horcruxes,” he murmured. “Where they are, what we know about them, and what it’ll take to capture them. The ring is going to be the easiest for us right now. The wand and the cup are still beyond our reach, unless someone knows an easy Rosier-attracting spell they haven’t told me. And we know

what it takes to remove the Sword, and it's a cost I'm unwilling to pay."

"It's a cost that you'll have to pay," Draco said, his hand cupping Harry's jaw. "You know that."

"I know!" Harry hissed, and jerked away from his touch. *When did it become more comfortable for him to avoid that?* Draco wondered, still staring into his eyes. "I know," Harry repeated more calmly, "but it's still harder to destroy the Sword than the ring. So I'll hunt the ring."

"Just you?"

Harry gave him an odd look. "Of course not. I wouldn't go in without protection, especially considering that my blood is needed to break the Unassailable Curse guarding the ring, and I might bleed to death. I would need someone to give me a Blood-Replenishing Potion, at least, and someone to face the traps in the house with me, and people to guard my back."

Draco relaxed. At least Harry's madness hadn't taken the track of convincing him he needed to act by himself.

"I'm here, Harry," he said, daring to duck his head and rub his cheek against Harry's, since they were alone. Predictably, Harry tensed up and took a tiny step back from him. Draco hid his sadness with a slight smile. "And I'm sure that your sworn companions would be more than happy to back you up, and of course Professor Snape won't let you go anywhere without him, and Rhangnara and Jing-Xi should be there, since they're practically Horcrux experts by now."

Harry nodded. "I was thinking of asking all of you to come with me. Perhaps also Regulus, since, after all, he does have the most direct experience of Horcruxes, and he might be able to note a sign that we'd all miss."

"Good," said Draco. "This weekend, then?" It was the earliest time they could reasonably get away, unless they wanted to stop attending class, and it didn't seem that Harry did. He was determined to keep one part of his life ordinary, and Draco had encouraged that, fearing he would get lost in esoterica otherwise.

"Yes." Harry nodded again, with a faint smile. "Thank you, Draco."

Draco followed him down the hall, smile plastered on, heart aching. They separated near the library, now that Harry was no longer pretending what he was studying. Harry gave him another nod that seemed to confirm that, yes, they *would* go to the Gaunt shack this weekend, and he would make all the necessary arrangements.

Draco watched him go in silence. He had appreciated that Harry would need some time to come to terms with his grief for his parents, and with the inner darkness he'd inadvertently shown Draco the night Medusa and Eos died, and with the trauma of those deaths, and with the knowledge about the Horcruxes. He had thought Harry would start trusting him again, start confiding in him, soon.

And now it seemed as if Harry were not only not doing that, he'd started to hide other things, things that didn't need to be hidden.

And Draco had no idea how to stop it.

"Sit down, Harry." Jing-Xi gave him a bright smile and turned back to the stack of parchment in front of her, which bore magical terms Harry didn't even know the meaning of. "Thomas and I were just speaking of what the best method would be to approach the ring, now that we know what guards it."

Harry let out a little breath of relief and sat down. He had been afraid, at first, that Jing-Xi would try to talk him out of going, but she spoke as if she had always known that he would approach her and ask her about the subject on this day. He studied the motions of her hair in the wavering currents of wind and waited until Thomas glanced up and noticed him.

His face brightened at once. Harry felt a small pulse of quiet satisfaction. Though Thomas still obviously mourned Priscilla, he was recovering much faster now that he had a project to immerse himself in.

"Harry," Thomas said. "If I'm right, then we can destroy the ring this weekend."

Harry blinked, and felt a little catch come to his throat. "You—you've found some way around the Unassailable Curse that demands a willing sacrifice?" he whispered.

“What?” Thomas frowned as if at a distant noise, then shook his head. “Oh. No.” Harry swallowed. “But I can almost guarantee that your blood will break the curse that needs the blood of Slytherin to work, and once inside we can get past most defensive spells.” His finger traced the edge of some writing on the parchment in front of him, and his grin had turned smug. “We found the spell Voldemort used to require sacrifices at last, you see.”

Harry leaned forward. Thomas all but shoved the document into his hand, and waited impatiently while he read.

The Chant of Sacrifice, the elegant letters at the top said, and below that Thomas had written in a moral natural style, copying the words out.

This Unassailable Curse will lock one’s possession beyond a ward that demands a living sacrifice to break it. Nor can the sacrifice be unwilling. The blood of the dead will not work to part this curse, nor will a former death that is “dedicated” later. The sacrifice must die either for love of the person who intends to destroy the possession or believing passionately that destroying the possession is the right thing to do.

The Chant of Sacrifice limits the defensive spells that can be used to protect the item; it is such a powerful spell that close proximity to it wears down and destroys most lesser magic. Blood-based wards are the most common, followed by other Unassailable Curses. Attempts to physically destroy the object will not succeed as long as the Chant of Sacrifice has not been undone, but, on the other hand, defensive spells that rely on common destructive techniques—fire, pain, and mental control—cannot be placed in the same room with the guarded possession. Therefore, those who use the Chant of Sacrifice are best off studying other Unassailable Curses first, or managing to hide their possessions in plain sight.

“That doesn’t give him many choices, does it?” Harry said slowly, lifting his head. “Blood-based wards—but my tie to the blood of Slytherin should get us past those. And other Unassailable Curses. I suppose there could be more of them in the shack, but—”

“We won’t know that there are until we reach the ring,” said Jing-Xi, hair wavering around her faster than normal. Harry noted with quiet amusement that her magic had transformed the table almost entirely into a construction of amber and pearl, with here and there a gleaming rhinestone embedded in it. “And at least we know that we will not be facing compulsive wards, or guardian beasts.”

“It also explains why he just left the Sword of Gryffindor hanging in plain sight,” Thomas broke in. Harry thought he was physically incapable of keeping silent any longer. “We found that spell, too, by the way, a variant of the Chant of Sacrifice that can only be undone by the object piercing the victim’s heart,” he added as an aside, then leaped back to his original topic. “And the other Horcruxes—well, we don’t know about the cup, but the wand was hidden in an obscure place where no one would think to look for it unless they knew Tom Riddle’s personal history. Their best protection, though, was the fact that no one knew Voldemort had made Horcruxes at all.” Thomas’s teeth gleamed as he smiled. “And we took that away. We’re going to destroy him, Harry. I promise we will.”

If someone dies each time.

Harry rattled the document with the information on the Chant of Sacrifice. “So you’re absolutely sure that there’s no way around a willing sacrificial death as a requirement for destroying each one?”

Thomas hesitated. Jing-Xi leaned forward and whispered in his ear, to which he listened, nodding. Then he faced Harry and said, “We haven’t found one. And Jing-Xi wants to speak with you for a moment.”

“Of course,” said Harry, even as his heart began to pound. Thomas picked up a book that looked to weigh at least half as much as he did and retreated with it into the library shelves. Harry faced Jing-Xi.

He was disturbed to see a ripple of anxiety on her face. Usually, she gave the impression that she’d seen the worst the world had to throw at her before, and she could control and predict what followed. Now she regarded him with that anxiety, and with pity right above it, like light dancing on water.

“Harry,” said Jing-Xi quietly. “You know that the sooner we destroy the Horcruxes, the sooner we can win the war.”

“Yes,” said Harry, his voice gone hollow. “Of course.”

“And you know that there are people alive who love you very much,” Jing-Xi said, her voice dipping even lower. “And even more people who hate Voldemort, who’ve lost their homes and families to him. They would be willing to die as sacrifices. If not for love of you, to know that they’re destroying something that would rid the world of him. Ask, and you shall receive help from them.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut.

“It must be done,” said Jing-Xi, as if she were talking about a nasty potion to be taken.

“I *know*,” said Harry, and tried to control the impulse to snap and flail. He’d *known* about this, he had, and there was no way around the Chant of Sacrifice. He was sure that Jing-Xi and Thomas would have found it if there was one. What did that leave but giving in and at least retrieving the Horcruxes?

There was the worry over whether he could ask someone to give up his or her life and not be willing to do it himself, of course, but that would sound silly and selfish in the face of simple reality. They needed to have the Horcruxes, and they needed to face the consequences and the difficulties of destroying them.

It’s Voldemort’s fault, Harry tried to reassure himself. *It’s his cruelty and his obsession with immortality that caused this, not the requirements of my ethics.* He opened his eyes and shook his head, focusing on Jing-Xi again. “I want to try and retrieve the ring this weekend, if we can,” he said.

“Good.” Jing-Xi gently touched the parchment in front of her. “Both Thomas and I will go with you. We have found ways to counter many common and small Unassailable Curses, the ones that Voldemort might have used to defend his property. You will allow that?”

“Of course,” said Harry. He meant it, just as he had when Draco had asked him the same thing. “I wouldn’t dream of going alone, not when I *know* I’ll need help and something might happen to me when I break the curse that depends on the blood of Slytherin.”

“Good,” Jing-Xi repeated. Then she leaned forward and looked into his eyes. Puzzled, Harry let her do it. He knew she wasn’t a Legilimens. If she were looking for signs of wavering, she wouldn’t find them. Harry didn’t intend to dash off on his own, and in the end he would allow the sacrifices to destroy the Horcruxes, because he had to. He had chided so many other people in his time for failing to live up to reality; how could he break his own standards?

Perhaps she was looking for something else. Harry was confident she wouldn’t find it. He was as committed to this war as he was to his *vates* path, and the worries were hidden away with his grief about his parents—not suppressed, because he had promised Henrietta he wouldn’t suppress them, but private and his.

At last, the Light Lady shook her head and sat back. “Do remember that you can come and talk to me about anything that you might *want* to talk to me about, Harry,” she said, with a slight emphasis on the verb.

“Of course,” Harry said, still puzzled. “Thank you for helping us with this. You didn’t have to.”

Jing-Xi’s smile was sorrowful. “What the other Lords and Ladies forget, most of the time, is that we all live in one world,” she said, “even though that is the very concept of the Pact. A successful Dark Lord in Britain will affect the balance of power in Australia, in Mexico, in China, in Senegal. We should use our superior knowledge of the magical world and our power to help prevent such problems, not handle them when it’s too late.”

Harry smiled. “I think I see why we get along so well, my lady.” He kissed her hand and took his leave, to contact his sworn companions and confirm their journey this weekend.

“But I want to come.”

“No.”

Ever since he had taken the Switching Potion, Connor thought, folding his arms, his sole contribution to the war effort seemed to be offering help that Harry rejected. Harry at least didn’t seem as dismissive of Connor’s offer to come to the Gaunt shack with him as he had of Connor’s offer to take the Switching Potion and bear his visions. He was looking steadily at Connor, not a piece of parchment, and his eyes were calm, even sorrowful. But his face was set, too.

It shouldn’t have to be, Connor thought. *If Draco is going, why can’t I go? I want to be there in case there’s an Unassailable Curse that needs twins to break it.*

That wasn’t the whole reason, of course. Mostly, he wanted to spend time with his brother, share his danger and his concerns. But

Harry didn't seem to consider that a good enough reason, so Connor wouldn't offer it.

"Please, Harry?" he murmured, and tried to keep his voice to the mixture of patience and dignity that he imagined Padma had used when she was pleading with Parvati's parents. "It makes sense that I be there. I don't have as much direct battle experience as the others, but this is a dangerous situation that's not exactly a battle. The perfect way for me to become stronger, don't you think, and more acclimated to the war? And then you'll know that I can defend myself next time, and you won't be so eager to leave me behind."

"That's not the point, Connor," Harry replied calmly. "The people I'm taking along have a special reason to accompany me. I'm not taking along Henrietta simply because she's here and wants to help. It's about including the people I need, not excluding the ones I don't."

Connor tossed his head. He couldn't help it. This was just—this was so Harry, to leave people behind to protect them, even if they wanted to come more than anything else in the world. And he thought Harry was forgetting that Connor was his brother again, not a child to be protected. *I'm fifteen minutes younger than he is, not fifteen years.* "And you don't think you'll need me?"

"Not in this capacity." Harry twisted his head to the side for a moment. "Do you think of yourself as not my equal, Connor?"

"What?" *Trust Harry to derail the argument with a nonsensical question.*

"Do you think less of yourself because you can't absorb magic?" Harry continued relentlessly. "Do you think that you should be able to talk to snakes? Or meet with Lords and Ladies from different countries, and try to convince them to give help to Britain?"

"Of course not," said Connor, growing more and more befuddled. "The only thing I've ever *envied* you over is Quidditch. The rest of the time, I was either taking you for granted, angry at you, or the wise and dignified pillar of maturity I've been since fourth year. The wise and dignified *twin* that you're trying to leave at home," he added significantly.

"Exactly," said Harry, not grasping the hint. "You can't help me on this journey, Connor, but everyone else involved can. They have specialized knowledge, or they've sworn oaths to defend me. But that doesn't mean I dislike you, or that I don't want you with me. Just that your place in the war is different."

"Tell me when you find it, will you?" Connor scowled at him.

Harry's face remained entirely, serenely serious. "*You* have to find it, Connor," he said. "Do you want to be a fighter? Train harder in defensive magic, and pay attention to the way it's incorporated into all our classes now, not just Peter's. Do you want to be someone who flies around outside of battles rescuing people? Practice picking up more than just the Snitch on your broom. Do you want to be a Healer? Study medical magic."

"I know what I want to do," said Connor, wondering why Harry hadn't phrased it that way from the beginning. He would have understood much more quickly.

"What?" Harry prompted.

"Be a spy and a fighter both," Connor said. "Watch the land for you, scout during battles, and fight when it comes to that." He paused. "And I think I should learn to master my Animagus form, first of all," he added.

Harry laughed in delight. "I don't think the Death Eaters will anticipate a spying boar," he said. "And, so far as they know, we only have three Animagi on our side, since so many people saw my lynx transformation in the Great Hall that day. They'll have no reason to suspect you."

"Good." Connor stood up straight. "But you'll let me come with you when I've demonstrated that I can help?"

"Yes. Of course. That's the major reason I'm letting Draco come with me. He's trained so hard in defensive magic that he's the equal of Bill and Charlie now, and he'll be as good as Owen soon if he keeps on at this current pace."

Connor snickered. Harry blinked at him. Connor debated leaving him in suspense, and decided that wouldn't be *exactly* fair. "You look so soppy when you talk about Draco," he said. "Your face gets all soft, and your eyes go all dreamy."

Harry promptly flushed. Connor decided he would accept that as adequate punishment for leaving him behind. This time.

And he's only leaving me behind until I become better able to defend myself, and him.

Harry waited patiently until Owen reappeared in front of them, with a slight nod. “All’s quiet around the shack,” he said. “And Bill and Charlie are under cover now, ready to ambush anyone who tries to ambush them.”

“Good,” said Harry, and reached for Draco’s arm. Draco stepped back from him with a raised eyebrow. Harry blinked at him.

“I’ve been practicing Apparition along with curses,” Draco said, with a slight toss of his head. “I could transport *you* there, Harry, if I wanted to.”

Harry snorted, but didn’t do anything to diminish the glow of pride that came to his face. Draco deserved to see it. “Then picture the shack,” he said, and glanced at the others with him—Thomas, Jing-Xi, Regulus, Snape, and Syrinx. Owen had already Apparated back to the shack to cover them as they came in. “The house, rather than the slope around it. The last time we were there, it was a different season, and I doubt it looks that way now.”

“The day I need Apparition advice from my son is the day that I will give up Apparating,” Snape said darkly, shutting his eyes.

Harry rolled his own, and then followed the advice, picturing the tumbledown shack, and not what had happened the last time they were there—Rosier’s capture and torture of Draco. Bill and Charlie would sound the alarm the moment someone unexpected showed up, and they would cast curses where Harry hesitated. It was the whole reason he had had them travel ahead.

But no alarms sounded, and the darkness of Apparition swallowed him and then cast him out again without a pause. When he looked around, he found that their most unexpected company was absolutely huge drifts of leaves, which seemed to have blown from up the slope. The trees around the dilapidated house were mostly dead. Now, Harry thought he knew why.

Thomas appeared behind him, and then Regulus, and they both turned their heads towards the same part of the house. Harry gave a small nod. That was the Unassailable Curse that could only be broken by the blood of Slytherin. He drew a small knife from his pocket, and looked to Thomas. “The wrist, or the arm?”

“The wrist,” said Jing-Xi, appearing without even a pop and striding forward with her magic flaring around her like a floating tapestry. “It will incapacitate you less than a wound on the arm if we need to fight.”

Harry nodded, and bent down next to the curse. He felt the others tense, and Draco’s hand settled on his shoulder and rested there. A moment later, Snape’s hand did the same thing on his other shoulder. Harry fought the impulse to shrug them off. They were doing it to reassure him, and themselves. He could put up with being touched by two people for that short period of time.

He made a small cut across his left wrist, and then he aimed the wound at the knot of the curse. At the same time, he felt Jing-Xi’s magic rising around him, wrapping the rest of the magic on the shack in a soft, cushiony cloud. There would be few defenses but the Chant of Sacrifice on the Horcrux itself, but Voldemort had impregnated the walls of the shack with many dark spells.

For the moment, of course, it remained to be seen if the Unassailable Curse could even be broken.

Harry’s blood gleamed, six rich drops, on the dark coil of the curse. A moment later, Harry saw a snake flicker into being, its neck arched and its eyes slit and its tongue extended—a mimicry of the snake that formed the Slytherin crest in Hogwarts. The shape of the serpent drank the blood and seemed to consider, head tilted to one side as if evaluating the taste. Harry held his breath.

And then the curse fell apart, and the rest of the spells on the house came to life, lashing out furiously, trying to destroy the intruders.

Jing-Xi’s magic met them, and shielded the people around her. Harry could feel her adding more and more substance to the cloud as the minutes wore on. Voldemort might not have anticipated that many people approaching the house would be Lord-level wizards, but he had known about Dumbledore, and the curses were braided and bound on each other to such depths that they reinforced each other’s effects. Bursts of black flame and goutts of lavender lightning leaped at Jing-Xi and were forced back, but it took her far more of an effort than it had seemed it would at first.

He could help. Harry stepped up beside her, sparing a small *Integro* to heal the wound on his wrist, and began to drink the magic of the spells. He grimaced as he did—it was Dark Arts—but it wasn’t as inherently foul as the magic from Voldemort and Death Eaters that he had swallowed before. And as he drank, his own magic closed around the swallowed power and began to purify and drain it, breaking it down like stomach acids, making sure it dwelt more comfortably in his body. Harry supposed he was learning how to wield the *absorbere* gift, in a way he didn’t when he automatically slid the magic into another person or a defensive spell.

The final sparks coalesced and died. Jing-Xi stood still, her senses extending along with the waving of her hair towards the shack.

“There are no other defensive spells present,” she said, opening her eyes.

Harry let out a relieved breath and started to step forward, but Owen and Syrinx got in the way. “Let us, sir,” Syrinx murmured, her golden hair gleaming as she ducked into the shack.

Harry opened his mouth to protest, then shut it, hard. They were sworn companions, and they were doing what a sworn companion was supposed to do. It would be hypocritical to protest now. Draco and Snape had moved up at his shoulders again, and Draco’s hand brushed his back now and then, regular as the motion of a pendulum. Reminding him that his life was important to more people than just his sworn companions, Harry supposed.

He hoped no one would notice the dull flush on his face. Outside battle situations, where he could see the necessity of protection, he still found this many people focused on his safety uncomfortable.

Syrinx came back out after several interminable moments; Owen had remained inside to check for more traps, Harry knew. “It’s perfectly safe, sir,” she said, with a small bow of her head. “Would you care to enter?”

Harry had to bite his tongue again at the formality, and he went inside, with Draco and Snape close behind him, Regulus at Snape’s shoulder, and Thomas and Jing-Xi behind Regulus in turn.

The shack inside was a pair of small rooms, with so much dirt smeared into the floor and the walls that it seemed to hover like a living presence in the air. Draco promptly began sneezing and muttering a complaint about dirt getting on his hair and clothing. Snape was impassive, but Harry heard the faint creak as his hand tightened around his wand.

And both of them showed no inclination to move away from his shoulders. Harry shook his head and looked around the room.

A faint shimmer in a corner caught his attention. When he looked closely at it, it didn’t quite match the rest of the room—a bend in the wall where there shouldn’t be one, a shadow where no shadows should fall. Harry took a step forward and closed his eyes. Yes, there was magic there, though deliberately low-key, nothing to compare to the former formidable defenses on the shack.

Harry, remembering what the document had said about only certain defensive spells being useful around a Horcrux, opened the wound on his wrist with another flick of his knife, and tossed the drops in the direction of the shimmer.

There was a loud and long hiss, like a hot iron rod being plunged into water, and the illusion vanished. Harry nodded. *It was a blood-based ward.*

Beyond it, absurdly beautiful for such a gloomy place, a sapphire-blue stone appeared, sitting on the floor. Embedded in it was a heavy golden ring. Harry took a few steps closer, being cautious, and made out the black stone in the center, carved with a deep line that appeared to be the outside of a coat-of-arms. He relaxed. Thomas had said the Peverell ring would look like that.

He took another step closer.

A figure appeared between him and the ring.

Harry slammed to a stop. The figure was no ghost, but looked like a living wizard, other than a slight transparency. He was small, but stolid, with long green robes and a twisting gray beard. His face resembled a monkey’s in more than one sense. His hands clutched a wand and a thick staff twined, like a caduceus, with two serpents facing each other.

Harry knew who he was. He’d seen a statue of him before, after all.

“Slytherin,” he breathed.

The shade of Salazar Slytherin gave him a slow, lazy smile, and moved both the wand and staff so that they pointed at him. “My descendant did say that I might have to face intruders someday. I did not know that they would manage to break the blood-wards. That you did is interesting. Very interesting.” His voice reminded Harry of Thomas’s, but drained of all human passion. Where Thomas wanted knowledge for innocent purposes, Harry could well imagine Slytherin getting up to dangerous experiments for the sake of the knowledge he could gain from them, without caring whom he hurt.

“I am, in a sense, your descendant,” said Harry, the beat of his heart increasing. He didn’t want to fight Slytherin if he could help

it. Besides being a Parselmouth, Slytherin had been a dangerous Dark wizard, and if the blue stone holding the ring was a ward-stone—as Harry now suspected—then he would be at least as strong as the shades of Godric, Rowena, and Helga inside Hogwarts. “My blood could break the ward and the curse on the house because of the connection between me and Tom Riddle.”

Slytherin laughed. “I’m not a ward, you know, a mindless piece of magic that allows you through because of a technicality. I *know* who my heir is, and there is only one man in the world that fits that description. And he wishes to live forever, to keep my bloodline alive in the world forever. I see nothing wrong with that.” He hissed something, a word that Harry had never heard before, and the snakes twined around the staff turned their heads. Beams of blue light broke from their eyes, one pair aimed at Draco, the other at Snape.

He can cast spells in Parseltongue, and not just to command basilisks, Harry thought, reaching out with his absorbere gift to swallow the blue magic. *I didn’t even know that was possible. Shit.*

He swallowed the magic, but it was unfamiliar, and sharp, like swallowing broken glass. He closed his eyes, ill, and in that moment Slytherin hissed something else, and the whole shack seemed to writhe.

“Harry!” Owen cried out—not in fear, Harry thought, but startlement.

He opened his eyes to see the wooden walls bulging into serpents, with short slim bodies and mouths that seemed all fang. He took a step forward, and then bent over, shuddering as he cried out. The Parseltongue magic he’d swallowed was boiling like poison in his gut, rapidly spreading out through the rest of his magic with the heat of infection.

“You really should look at what you put in your mouth, instead of eating it trustingly,” Slytherin remarked, a tone of light condescension in his voice.

Harry didn’t respond. The heat was getting worse, and now it seemed to be corroding his magic, breaking it down like some serpent venoms broke down the internal organs. The first of the wooden snakes was drawing near Syrinx. She chanted the Blasting Curse, and that broke off some of the teeth, but not enough, and the teeth flew as splinters, coming close to impaling Owen and Regulus.

I have to expel the magic.

Harry forced himself to concentrate on that, and not on the danger his friends were in. He had to trust them to protect themselves for a moment. He picked out the heat of the poison and *spat*, vomiting the tainted magic back in Slytherin’s general direction.

The shadow flickered and disappeared just as the dark blue light passed through it. Harry narrowed his eyes. *So he can be hurt by his own magic as transformed by my magic. Perhaps.*

He hissed a command to stop at the snakes, but they ignored him. Harry had to disintegrate them instead, which resulted in more splinters, and huge puffs of dust, and gaping holes in the walls of the shack. He couldn’t imagine that Voldemort didn’t know about their intrusion by now. If he had wards on the shack, they would be clanging like Muggle sirens.

Slytherin gave another casual hiss, and Harry felt his legs shifting, scales swelling under his skin, his arms slamming close to his sides to be swallowed by smoothness. He was being forcibly Transfigured into a snake.

Harry leaped in his mind instead, reaching for his Animagus form. The well-known lynx shape settled around him, forcing the coils away. Harry charged the shade and scraped a paw through him, but Slytherin went transparent, and Harry’s paw moved through the air where he had been without stopping.

Slytherin spat. Harry ducked his head. He felt the burn and spatter of what seemed acid on the back of his neck. He shuddered to think of what would have happened if he’d been looking Slytherin in the eyes when that venom flew.

He estimated the condition of his allies with a quick glance. Minor bleeding wounds covered every one of them, and Slytherin could turn his attention to them at any moment. Harry was unsure that McGonagall or Henrietta could Transfigure someone else back from snake shape if they were changed with Parseltongue magic.

We need to retreat. We know that we can access the shack, now, and I speak Parseltongue, so I can learn this magic, if I study it. And I suppose there can’t be alarm wards, can there, since I drank them when Jing-Xi invaded the shack?

He did pause a moment, to see if Jing-Xi knew something that might defeat the Parseltongue, but when her light advanced, Slytherin addressed a few annoyed words to it, and it not only stopped but vanished altogether.

Voldemort would have appeared by now to defend his property, I think. We'll have another chance. And, in any case, I'm not about to have my people killed or hopelessly wounded in a battle that I know we can fight another day.

Harry tried to ignore the little squirm of happiness in his stomach at the thought of not losing anyone as a sacrifice to the Horcrux yet, and transformed back to human, calling out, "Apparate!"

They didn't question him, thank Merlin, but simply did it, other than Draco. *Of course.* Harry snatched his arm and narrowed his eyes at Slytherin, hissing a threat in Parseltongue as they vanished.

He was pleased to see a brief look of shock on the shade's face. Slytherin must not have heard him when he tried to command the wooden serpents. It seemed to surprise him that Harry was a Parselmouth.

And I look forward to surprising him even more.

The world was laughter.

He had known the moment battle was joined at the house that held the ring, of course, and had watched from a distance. In fact, it had been a simple matter to summon a vision of the shack in the Grand Design of pounded blood and flesh on the floor of his burrow. He had the power to do that now.

He had seen no reason to interfere. The nasty surprise of Slytherin's waiting shade meant that Harry could not fight his way to the ring yet. And the defenses on the shack were set to repair themselves when the danger was gone. Yes, few defensive spells could be used around a Horcrux protected with the Chant of Sacrifice, but blood-based ones were permitted, and the blood of Slytherin—the *true* blood of Slytherin, not the debased and unnatural connection Harry had with him—maintained the ward-stone and would defend its own.

No need to let Harry think he knew about the intrusion. Not yet. Harry would come back, doubtless with Parseltongue magic on his own lips.

And Lord Voldemort, the only true Lord Britain would ever know, would be waiting to meet him when he did.

His gaze slid sideways, to the Death Eater who crouched next to him, silent and obedient as a dog.

In very good company.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-One: Transportation

Harry closed his eyes. He could picture the incantation in his head, the shapes of both the letters and the way his mouth would have to move when making the sounds. He held them there firmly, and then said, "*Lumos.*"

The word came out in Parseltongue. Harry opened his eyes in triumph and watched as a small, bobbing light showed up unsteadily in front of him. It only danced for a few moments before winking out, but given that it was the first result he had to show after five days of effort, Harry thought he was allowed to be proud anyway.

Parseltongue magic was complicated and difficult to learn, and when Harry had turned up information on it, he saw why most wizards, even Parselmouths, rarely bothered with it. One had to move from the instinctive way in which the human mouth formed spells to the ways in which the serpentine tongue would form the same incantations—and since most spell words didn't have natural Parseltongue equivalents, this involved mental and magical effort as well as physical strain. It took a long time to work up to the more powerful spells even then.

Harry knew that they didn't have that time. His main purpose was to accustom his body to the feeling, sound, sense, and taste of Parseltongue magic so that he could swallow it without harm the next time he faced Slytherin's shade. More research had convinced him that Parseltongue magic was not naturally poisonous to someone with an *absorbere* gift; it was only the strangeness of it that had made him choke. He could build up a tolerance.

"*Someone comes,*" Argutus, who had been alternately complimenting him on and complaining about his pronunciation, said

abruptly.

Harry turned and walked up beside the Omen snake, facing the door of the classroom he'd chosen. He knew this was a person Argutus didn't like, or he would have hissed a greeting. Instead, his body coiled back on itself and his tail lashed, an impressive sight now that he had reached more than six feet. Harry stroked the milky-mirrored scales to calm him.

The door opened, and Michael slipped in.

Harry frowned. He hadn't had wards up to protect the room, because he knew he wouldn't advance into dangerous spells and someone else needed to be able to fetch him quickly if an attack happened, but it still showed a lamentable lack of caution on Michael's part that he'd simply entered without at least knocking or calling out first, or testing for guard spells.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"I wanted to talk to you."

Harry concealed his feeling that this was wasting time, and nodded. One more stroke served to calm Argutus down, or at least make him feel as if there was something interesting on the other side of the room he should look at. Harry nodded to one of the two chairs he'd intended to practice minor hexes on, if he managed to progress that far. "Sit down."

"I'll stand, thanks." Michael crossed his arms and stood a distance from him, staring. Harry breathed in and out, and reminded himself that he had no right to feel irritated. Michael had lost his mother and baby sister because he'd trusted to Harry's promises to protect them, promises he hadn't been able to keep. He would still be grieving. It was only a little more than a month since Medusa and Eos had died.

Harry himself still felt the wound, but he had no time to dwell on it. Sometimes he wondered if there was an injury deep inside him, like the mark a dragon's claw would make across a tree, and if it grew worse every time he heard about a death. He hoped not. A wound deep enough in a tree eventually made it fall.

"What did you want to speak with me about?" he asked, when it seemed that Michael wouldn't volunteer the information on his own.

"The fact that you still haven't made me a sworn companion and accepted my oath back," said Michael lowly.

"Part of that has to do with your attack on Liane's family, you know," Harry pointed out.

Whatever else Michael might have expected out of him, it, too obviously, hadn't been that. He blinked and stepped backwards. "You think I attacked them because I hated them?" he asked.

"What was the reason?"

"I was trying to protect you," Michael snapped. "To show that I wouldn't let your attackers go unpunished. But obviously you valued their lives more than you valued the lives of my mother and sister, since you protected them better."

Harry controlled his impulse to snap. *This war isn't all about you, remember? Your efforts aren't the only thing that will end it, and other people's grief is no less than your own.* "I am sorry for what happened," he said.

"Sorry won't bring them back."

"Neither will your becoming a sworn companion."

Michael's eyes glittered. "That's true," he said. "But I could at least be a voice of conscience, warning you against mistakes that might cost other lives." He leaned forward and studied Harry for a moment. "You've lost too many so far, haven't you? Mr. Bulstrode. My—my mother and my sister." He choked on the words, but didn't let them delay him long. "Your parents. Not to mention those who've disappeared in the past few weeks."

Harry nodded tightly. They had finally noticed a pattern of disappearances in both the magical and the Muggle worlds that undoubtedly connected to Voldemort seizing victims. They simply vanished, however, and Harry had not been able to discover their fates, even the one night he deliberately went without the potion that would suppress the visions. Voldemort had simply ignored the opportunity to strike at him. That told Harry he was preparing some great plan.

Drain them of their magic, and—what?

“You can’t protect all of them,” said Michael, in a patronizing tone. “My brother keeps telling you that. But you can protect more of them than you have so far. I could be the one who reminds you to do that. Owen and the others are too caught up in what you are, and their notion of how much you’ve suffered, to talk to you that way. *I’m not. I’m a living representative of the suffering.*”

“If that is true,” said Harry, trying not to show how much those words affected him, “then why did you want to attack Liane’s family and continue the suffering? They had lost a child.”

“Much as I may dislike you,” Michael said, “you are still our best chance for winning this war. People who cause their own suffering *just* to get at you are not people I wish to resemble.”

“And does that mean you wouldn’t do what I ask of you, if I did make you a sworn companion again?” Harry asked. “That you would attack people I asked you to spare? That’s worse than useless, for both of us. You would have no loyalty to anything but your own cause, the way you do now. I don’t see why placing a scar on your arm would be a good thing.”

“It would remind others of my closeness to you,” said Michael, his voice clipped. “It would give me something back in common with my twin. It would confer a sense of legitimacy on my reminders to you of your duty, which I don’t have as long as others simply see me as an interfering busybody. It would ease my pain and help prevent it in the future, but I can completely see why you don’t wish to place the scar there. After all, that would disturb your attention from your intense focus on your self-pity.” He whirled and strode towards the door.

Harry opened his mouth to call him back, but Argutus hissed, attracting his attention. “*I don’t like the way you smell when you’re with him.*” The Omen snake’s tail was lashing back and forth hard enough to hit the wall. “*You smell guilty and self-loathing and glad to hurt. Don’t talk to him.*” He flowed over to Harry and up his body, coiling over his chest and draping his head on the side of Harry’s neck, flicking out his tongue to taste his skin. “*You already smell too guilty and self-loathing and glad to hurt.*”

“But that would be what could change,” Harry told Argutus quietly, stroking his neck as he watched the closing door. “He could tell me when I’m feeling too much that way, and pull me back to reality.”

He wheezed a bit as Argutus’s coils tightened, showing just a hint of the immense strength that would crush his enemies, and did crush his prey. “*I would do that,*” said Argutus insistently. “*Draco would do that. The potions-smelling one would do that. Don’t rely on him. We will all do it, and hurt you less.*”

Harry considered that for a moment, then nodded. If it was true that he couldn’t forget about the war and what it cost other people, then it was also true that he couldn’t do stupid things just to indulge one person. And associating with Michael would get them both hurt in the end, fueling Michael’s admitted dislike and his own liking for censure and blame. It could easily become the situation with the monitoring board all over again, with Harry using Michael as an excuse to cage himself up.

I can’t afford that. The limits I put on myself have to be ones that I put there because they’re necessary, not to please other people. I’m giving both Draco and Snape some space from my more unusual emotions and sparing myself pain because I know they’d argue against them, for example, but it would be wrong if I was doing it just because I thought that was what they’d like best.

He shook his head and turned back to practice the Parseltongue magic again, but had to pause as a second person knocked on the door. His astonishment increased when a silver-haired woman entered, one he didn’t recognize, with a girl he vaguely did by her side.

“Adrienne?” he asked, studying the girl. He thought this was the same Veela representative, cousin of Millicent’s husband-to-be Pierre, who had come to visit him in Woodhouse and tell him the Veela Council mostly supported him.

“Yes. You recognized me.” She gave him a dazzling smile and strode across the floor to take his hand, seemingly refusing to be disconcerted by the enormous snake twined around him. Harry, in turn, tried to ignore the shimmer of the webs that bound her. She willingly went under those webs, Adrienne had told him once, when she traveled abroad. “I am glad. This is my cousin Roxane.” She turned and nodded to the woman just behind her. “She only speaks French, but we have cast a translation spell.”

“Hello,” said Roxane, whose eyes were intent and searching his for—Harry didn’t know what. They seemed to find it, however, and after a moment she relaxed.

“What can I do for the Veela Council?” Harry asked, wondering how he would balance whatever they might want of him among his other duties. But he would have to do it, whatever it was. That was the way he *needed* to proceed in this war, lest he become

too much of a *vates* or too much of a killer.

“We have come to offer you help,” said Adrienne gently, “not the other way around. We are sure that you must have too many people asking you for help as it is, and of course your first allegiance must be to Britain. Roxane can tell you more, however, as she is the official representative of the Council, and thus jealous of her prerogative.” She bowed her head and stepped aside.

Roxane had a small frown on her face, as if she didn't approve of Adrienne's teasing, but she started explaining as soon as Harry looked at her. “We will offer transportation out of the country to those humans or magical creatures who cannot stay and fight the war, or who wish to flee. We can describe Apparition locations in France to human wizards, and homes willing to receive them. For the magical creatures, we will have ships waiting in the Channel.”

Harry stared in spite of himself, then shook his head. “And the French Ministry approves of this?” he whispered.

“The ships are our own.” Roxane folded her arms. “They have nothing to do with them, approving them or disapproving of them. But yes, they have agreed to shelter those English wizards who may come to them and have no relative or friend to stay with.”

“Thank you,” Harry breathed, feeling his chest go tight.

Adrienne smiled at him. “When Millicent summoned Pierre, we knew things were growing bad in the Islands,” she said. “And now we learn what you face, and that makes the notion of escape more urgent, not less. We will transport anyone who asks for it, Harry. We ask only that you spread the message.”

Harry hesitated a moment, wondering if he should involve the Ministry. On the one hand, they needed to spread the message so that people would know they stood a chance of fleeing; on the other hand, they didn't want Voldemort to discover enough information to interfere and strike at the helpless ships.

In the end, he decided, reluctantly, that he would have to approach the Ministry. There were people who would listen to them if they spoke about this, people who would think Harry was lying. And the Light purebloods or frightened citizens, as much as the ones who followed him, deserved to know about the opportunity of sanctuary.

Of course, that didn't mean he had to talk to Juniper directly.

Aurora stared at the owl in front of her. The owl stared back, and then hooted softly, as if to say that she didn't appreciate the stare, and someone had *better* remove the message from her leg soon.

Aurora did, though she kept a careful eye on the great white bird's enormous talons. This was Harry's personal bird. She wouldn't put it past him to have told the owl to claw her.

The owl simply shook her feathers as the letter was taken off her foot, though, and then waited. Aurora opened the envelope.

September 22nd, 1997

Dear Madam Whitestag:

We have never been the best of friends, but that does not mean we stand on opposite sides of the fence. You once aspired to be my conscience when I asked you to, and then accepted that you could not be and retreated when I asked for that. You know something about voluntary limitations. I cannot believe that you follow even Juniper blindly. You are too smart for that.

I wanted to tell you that the Veela Council has offered sanctuary for magical creatures and humans who wish to flee to France. They will have ships waiting for the magical creatures, and people who can describe Apparition locations for the wizards. Of course, if too much detail is given out, Voldemort may attack, but I think the message is still worth passing. My main concern is that if only I announce it, there will be people who need the sanctuary and don't flee because they don't believe me.

Please announce this. You may tell Acting Minister Juniper that you heard of this directly from the Veela Council themselves, if you think that will work. They can send a representative to meet with you, and that will both strengthen the lie and make it seem as if the Veela are willing to work with the British Ministry.

If you do nothing, then I will approach someone else in the Ministry. I sent this letter to you first not because everything depends on you, but because I believed you the most reasonable and moderate member of the Order of the Firebird.

*Yours,
Harry vates.*

Aurora laid the letter slowly on the desk, and stared at the snowy owl. "I suppose he wants an answer?" she whispered.

The owl bobbed her head, golden eyes bright, and held out a leg as if she thought that Aurora had one right then. Aurora sat back, though, and then turned to face the wall. It was easier if she didn't have to look at the parchment or the bird, both of which seemed to expect things of her that she wasn't sure she could give.

"What can I do?"

And then she closed her eyes, because, no matter where her allegiances might lie or what oaths she might have sworn, she knew there was only one right thing to do. She would have to tell Erasmus that the Veela Council was willing to offer transportation, and offer whatever flattery or polite lies might make him think that his own diplomatic brilliance had won their cooperation. He would reject the idea of the announcement out of hand if he thought this came from Harry.

Our people deserve to know about this chance, no matter if they trust Erasmus or Harry. He's right about that.

But it told on her, it wore on her, it ate at her, that it would have to be a lie, and that there was no chance of telling Erasmus that the *vates* had a good idea. Aurora had ideals of fairness too strong for her own good, sometimes. People should know the truth, whether it was good or evil, and someone heroic should earn credit for his actions. She had wanted everyone to know that Harry had killed her children when that was the most important factor, when they would have forgotten about it and honored him as the hero of the Battle of Hogwarts otherwise, and she would want everyone to know that Harry had earned the Veela Council's support now.

But she had grown used, in the last few months, to accepting that what she wanted to happen rarely happened, and it could not be allowed to stand in the way of a greater good.

And if you think that a greater good sometimes isn't one? What happens if you change your mind later?

That was what had happened to her and some of Erasmus's ideas. She had supported the legislation against Dark magic, because she *had* to. She had let it pass, hadn't she? That meant she had to support it, had to believe in it.

But in the last week or so, she had changed her mind conclusively about that. It was a bad idea to ban the Dark Arts in the middle of the war and send a substantial portion of the population fleeing into the arms of their enemy. Not every Dark wizard would trust Harry to protect their interests, since he also used Light magic and served Light wizards. So they had gone to Voldemort. Or some of them had, anyway, according to rumor, and some was still too many.

She had a chance to make up for that, she hoped, at least a little, if she convinced Erasmus to make Harry's announcement.

In the end, she turned around, wrote a letter assuring Harry that she would get Erasmus to announce this one way or the other, and sent it back with the snowy owl. The bird flew off eagerly, as if she didn't want to stay in the Ministry one moment longer than necessary. Aurora snorted in spite of herself. She understood the feeling.

"That was the owl of a friend of ours, wasn't it?"

Aurora spun, her heart loud and insistent in her throat. She couldn't believe that she hadn't heard the door to her office open, or the approach of the wizard who stood there now, evaluating her with calm eyes. Cupressus Apollonis smiled and leaned against the doorframe. Aurora locked eyes with him, waiting for him to call out for the Acting Minister and get her damned for cooperation with the *vates*.

"I asked you a question," said Cupressus at last.

Aurora stiffened her shoulders, a surge of nervous, angry defiance striking up her spine. *If he wants to condemn me, at least he can do it for something I actually did.* "Yes, it was," she said.

And Cupressus smiled, and closed the door behind him.

Aurora stared at it for long moments. Cupressus Apollonis was currently the most confusing person in her immediate vicinity.

Although I come close myself, she thought, and tried to calm her conflicting feelings, and stood to take the message to Erasmus.

She would do what she could to honor the principles she believed in, but surely, by now, it was too late to completely change her allegiance.

Narcissa picked up the heavy stone cup and studied it intently. If she could not locate the writing she believed to be on it, then she was inclined to agree with Regulus; it would make a good gift for Harry, as it automatically purified whatever drink or food rested in it from poison.

But then she saw the letters incised near the bottom of the cup, and shook her head, handing it back to Regulus. "This is another of those treasures that can be used only by someone of Black blood," she said. "We may send it to Draco, but Harry's legal heir status is not enough to protect him. Otherwise, the drink or food set in the cup will turn to poison instead."

Her cousin scowled, his face reminding Narcissa forcefully of a time when he'd been seven years old and just discovered that he wasn't allowed to tag along with his older brother and play the games that Sirius did. "Damn," he muttered, reluctantly taking the cup. "If only our ancestors hadn't been so insistent that *blood* was the true measure of someone's worth, instead of magic or character..."

Narcissa concealed a smirk as she stepped away from Regulus. He knew as well as she did that most of the ancient pureblood families had been the same way. If they discovered relatively few treasures that could help Harry, it was more the fault of a common perception in the wizarding world than the Blacks themselves.

Regulus mournfully set the cup down among the large pile of objects they would have to hesitate about using, and then paused before he turned to the next one he'd retrieved and needed to evaluate, a gold-framed mirror. "Narcissa?" he asked softly.

She blinked. That tone in his voice meant something more than a question about whether or not she remembered this Black treasure from her childhood. "Yes?"

He twisted around to face her. And, to her astonishment, she realized that it was *concern* in his eyes, not a need for reassurance. "How are you doing?" he asked. "With the loss of Lucius, with the fact that your son will be a major target for the Death Eaters, since he's Harry's lover? Can you bear it?"

Narcissa looked down at her clasped hands. She had hoped no one would ask her this question, even Harry, even her son. Knowing that someone else had noticed her problems made her more likely to break and confess them.

But, after a moment, the surge of prickling tears behind her eyelids went away, and she took a deep breath and lifted her head. "I am a Black and a Malfoy," she said. "I bear them because I must, because I know that worse things will come of not carrying them. I might hesitate when I see Lucius across the battlefield, for example, and believe so strongly that he can be redeemed that I let him hurt others. That is what happened to Harry when Voldemort brought him along to Malfoy Manor. And I might begin to believe that my son *will* die, instead of its simply being likely. I might forget that he has the protection and love of the second strongest wizard in Britain. I would not want to forget those things. I live in reality, Regulus, not in a misty dream-world. And so I simply live with the horrible things."

Regulus studied her a moment, eyes brooding. Then he said, "I never planned to have children, you know."

Narcissa said nothing. She had not known what ran through Regulus's mind when he joined the Death Eaters. She had assumed he did it mostly to please his parents, Capella and Canopus, whom he feared would disown him otherwise. He had not been exceptionally brave, then, Regulus. He had been the spoiled Slytherin scion of a Dark pureblood family, and even if he was gentler and more humorous than most people would have been in that position, he could not escape the shadow of his upbringing.

"But I never planned to spend more than a decade as a dog, either." For a moment, Regulus's lips curled in a bitter smile, but it was gone so quickly that Narcissa, as ever, was unsure how much his long imprisonment and torture had affected him. "And now I find myself with a son, a legal heir, who has a high chance of not surviving the war."

He focused on her again, and his smile turned melancholy. "I suppose I was looking for some advice on having a child in a dangerous world. That's all."

Narcissa's shoulders relaxed. She could deal with this better than she could with someone asking her, specifically, how she was.

"One lives with it," she said simply. "Thinks about other things when possible, and grows used to the knowledge that part of oneself is out in the world, enduring danger, perhaps to be burned. Rather like being unable to extract your hand from a cup of

boiling water, when I think of it.”

Regulus studied her for a moment longer, and then nodded. “Thank you,” he said, though Narcissa wasn’t sure what, if anything, in her words had managed to comfort him. He turned and picked up the mirror. “And do you remember anything about this particular piece from our loving childhood?”

Narcissa applied herself to answer, grateful that he wouldn’t be pursuing the subject any further.

Yes, it was like having her hand in a cup of water which might begin to boil at any moment. Draco was in danger every moment he breathed, now, when a Death Eater might kill him on Voldemort’s orders or for a taste of glory. And of course he had been in keener danger before this, when he suffered at Voldemort’s hands, or the hands of Evan Rosier.

But Narcissa had fought Lucius and her own protective tendencies and the weight of all the pureblood dances and Harry’s enemies for Draco to have the right to make his own choices. She could not rail against the consequences now simply because his choices involved some danger.

One bows one’s head. One endures.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Two: Whose Whole Life’s Love Goes Down In a Day

Harry lay back on their bed, smiling slightly as he stroked Argutus. Draco had fallen asleep, exhausted after yet another day of hard training. Their soft hissing didn’t tend to wake him up when he was snoring like that, though Harry knew better than to move; Draco would move after him and drape an arm across his chest again, until they finally fell off the bed.

“*So we go to the den tomorrow,*” said Argutus, and curled closer to Harry. Ever since he had learned that another wizard who spoke Parseltongue lived there, he had refused to call it a “house,” though he could; he’d insisted that where a snake-speaker lived must be a den. “*And you will win because you have me with you.*”

“Smug one,” Harry responded, running one finger under the Omen snake’s chin and down his throat as far as he could reach. Argutus let out a hiss that left his tongue fluttering in the air for a long moment. Harry liked to think of it as his version of a purr. “*Such a smug one.*”

“*I will make the difference,*” said Argutus, and laid his head down, turning so that his mouth was buried in his coils. “*You would have won the first time if you had had me with you.*”

Harry chose to shut his eyes instead of replying. He knew that tomorrow would be hard. Just because he could swallow Parseltongue magic now didn’t mean that he expected Slytherin to give up and accept it tamely. And he knew that Voldemort might come. That he hadn’t appeared the first time to defend his property gave Harry hope, but also made him suspicious. Surely, even if his wards had been so thoroughly disrupted that first time that he hadn’t sensed the intrusion, Slytherin would still have repaired the breach and told him.

Not that it matters, Harry thought, as sleep gripped him and began to tow him out to sea with warm hands. *We’ll still do battle in the shack, because we have to. And I may yet surprise Tom.*

As well as the Parseltongue magic, he’d been practicing with his absorbere gift. Voldemort probably knew the tricks he had discovered, but he didn’t know that Harry knew them.

And if comes near me with his stolen magic, then I am going to steal it away from him in turn.

Harry studied the group of people who waited behind him carefully. They were eight: his four sworn companions, Draco, Snape, Regulus, and Narcissa, who, this time, didn’t seem content to sit back while her son went into danger she might be able to help with. Thomas was busy, once again, researching ways they might be able to destroy the Horcrux without a willing sacrifice once they had captured it, and Jing-Xi had again been called back to China. Harry could hardly blame her. She was a *true* Lady, one who cared for her people, and when they needed her, she went to them. It was incredibly generous of her to give him as much time as she did.

Connor had begged hard to come, and so, oddly, had Michael. Harry had turned them both down, Michael for the obvious reason

and Connor because he hadn't yet achieved his Animagus form. His twin's face had gone stubborn when Harry said that, and he'd hurried out of the room. Harry hoped he was on his way to study.

Michael had sneered and stomped off. Harry hoped he wasn't causing more problems between him and his twin, but until and unless Owen complained, he would just have to assume that he wasn't. He simply had too much to do to worry about *potential* problems.

"Stay back, all of you," he cautioned them. "Argutus and I—" he touched the head of the Omen snake, who was twined around his body in looping coils—"have to be the ones to fight Slytherin. If you can help, then take an opportunity to do so, and of course you can defend yourself from any spells he casts. But don't interfere thinking that you'll help us if you do. I can almost guarantee that you *won't* help us."

"Yes, Harry," said Draco, with a meekness in his tone that Harry didn't believe for a moment.

Snape merely snorted, his dark eyes reflecting that he'd interfere whenever he damn well pleased. Likewise, Regulus and Narcissa looked unimpressed. Harry concealed a sigh, and hoped they'd let him do when he needed to do.

"Let's go," he said, turning forward.

Once again, Bill and Charlie Apparated in before them, and both Owen and Syrinx went to scout this time. Harry waited, quietly poised. He half-expected a warning that Voldemort was there, and half-expected them not to come back at all.

It was odd, how calmly he could think of that. Perhaps it was the hurrying of his heart in his ears over *everything*, Harry thought. He was thinking now of what would happen when they captured the Horcrux, how the end of that was not the end, of how they would need to sacrifice someone to destroy it. Compared to that, a death he did not truly expect to happen seemed a small thing.

He was tense, coiled, floating, not quite there. The closer they came to capturing the ring, the closer they came to—

To something that Harry truly wondered if he had the strength to step aside and let happen.

"Nothing there," said Owen quietly, appearing with a muted *crack* in front of them. "Come ahead."

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. He heard Argutus's smooth hiss of delight as they Apparated. The Omen snake had grown to like it, though perhaps only because he experienced it so rarely. Unlike the other time he had come along when they approached the shack—the time that Evan Rosier had managed to seize Draco—he did not slither off into the underbrush to investigate, though Harry saw from his wildly flicking tongue that he would have liked to. He stayed wound around Harry's body, and Harry turned to face the shack.

He saw at once that the Unassailable Curse that depended on the blood of Slytherin had not been repaired, and neither had the dark curses that had prevented simple entrance to the house last time. Harry smirked slightly. Either Voldemort truly did not know, or Slytherin had tried to repair them and failed. This *could* be a trap, of course, but it was an extremely risky one, given that Voldemort was taking the chance of losing one of the Horcruxes that guaranteed his immortality. And no matter how Harry stretched his senses, he could not sense the presence of a single ward. *Yes, he is taking a chance, thinking that he'll simply know when we appear, and be able to anticipate it and leave whatever he's doing at the time.*

Of course, true common sense would have required Voldemort to move the Horcrux once he realized they had figured out the secret of Slytherin's guardianship. But Voldemort had never been that practical. Once he chose something—whether it was a hiding place or a symbolic day of attack or a vessel for a Horcrux—he tended to root himself there and cling to it. Harry was grateful for it. It made him much easier to defeat.

"Follow me," he said, and slipped into the house, holding the door open as the others followed him.

He frowned as he watched their shadows ripple across the floor, and then realized what the strangeness came from. Narcissa, Snape, and Draco all had regular, human shadows, but the one that followed Regulus was still a Grim. It made it seem as if Death herself were following them into the house, but Harry knew the cause. He had no reason to feel so nervous.

Except that one, he thought, as he focused on the ring planted in what he now realized was an anchor-stone, to bind a shade, not a ward-stone. Merlin alone knew where Voldemort had found one. The ones binding the shades of the Founders had been placed in Hogwarts's roots before they became so rare, but this sapphire was a treasure, whether Voldemort had discovered it in an ancient tomb or some place more prosaic.

There was no blood-ward in front of it, either. Harry took a deep breath, the possibility that this might be a trap surging to the front of his mind.

But he could not forsake the pursuit of this Horcrux now. He simply had to take his chances and do what he could to outface it and outfight it.

He felt Argutus squeeze reassuringly around him. Harry hissed out a greeting to Slytherin and Voldemort both, if he was listening, and then took a step forward.

Instantly, the shade was between him and the ring. Slytherin's eyes darted over Argutus, and he smiled, once, in contempt.

"A Light snake, boy?" he asked. "Even if you can speak the proper language of a Dark wizard, such a serpent will not help you." He aimed his wand and staff again, and hissed the same command that he'd used before, which Harry could now vaguely understand as "Light eyes." The serpents began to aim their heads at Harry's friends, and he could see their eyes glowing blue.

Harry opened up his *absorbere* gift.

This time, he did not merely make it a flexible gullet leading back into his own magic, the way he had all the other times he'd used it. He envisioned a pack of hungry mouths all around him, and they took form, wide-stretched jaws with the misty bodies of serpents trailing back from them. They swarmed Slytherin, mouths opening and closing with a metallic sound, pulling eagerly at the Parseltongue magic. A snake could consume it without trouble.

Slytherin made a loud, startled sound, which disrupted his blue light spell. Harry moved forward, and the battle was joined in earnest.

Slytherin hissed another incantation, and the floor at his feet became a pit, from which vipers began to flow. Harry's snakes swung and closed in on them. Fangs snapped and tore, ripping heads from slender red bodies. The vipers tried to bite and poison Harry's serpents, but they were magical, and their existence depended on the whim of his will. When Harry imagined them flickering out of danger and then firming again—their steel teeth were the only things that couldn't vanish, since he needed the open mouths to absorb Slytherin's magic—they did so, and the vipers were left swaying in midair and looking foolish in the moment before they were decapitated.

Harry felt the magic flooding him, rich and dark as soil swarming with worms underground. He understood, now, after some study, why Parseltongue was considered such a Dark gift. It bespoke vague memories of a time when Parselmouths like Slytherin had wielded magic that no one else could—always Dark. Speaking to snakes in and of itself was almost a neutral gift. What that gift allowed its owners to do was not.

Jing-Xi's magic had stopped short of working against Slytherin for an excellent reason. Nothing Light could touch that power.

Harry had suspected that Argutus would not be able to help him during the battle itself, and so it proved. Every darting strike he made resulted, at best, in a viper dodging out of the way and coming in behind him. At last, Argutus simply clung to Harry's neck and torso and reflected spells that would otherwise be invisible in his scales.

"*He's calling up a spell that looks like a cobra behind you!*" he called authoritatively, when Harry's attention was so fixed on the shade he hadn't looked around in some time. "*And now there's a boa dancing down the wall, aiming for Draco. Tell him to lift his wand and fend it off with a Dark shield. They won't respect it otherwise.*"

Harry tossed his head back and called out the message to Draco, hoping like hell it was in English, then fixed on Slytherin again. The man had finally run out of serpents, and though he had tried some of the same spells he had when he first faced Harry, including spitting the acid-venom at his eyes, none of them had worked. Now Harry's snakes faced him, jaws champing up and down, hungry to swallow more magic, and Harry's own power had grown, swelling until it almost filled the front room of the small shack. Slytherin was watching him with a look of absolute hatred.

"You cannot take this ring from me," he breathed. "My blood *owns* it. And you are not of my blood. You cannot replace my descendant if you kill him."

"At this point," Harry said, "I don't really care." He didn't know if they were conversing in English or Parseltongue, and he didn't care about that, either. He wanted the ring. Slytherin was in the way. "You can, I suppose, step aside and survive that way. I won't destroy the anchor-stone. But I will have the ring."

"*No.*"

Harry shrugged slightly. “Suit yourself.”

And he sent the swarm of serpents forward, eating greedily at the magic that surrounded the shade—including the magic that maintained Slytherin in this form. Argutus let out a hiss that sounded like a cheer.

Slytherin did not die easily. He stamped on and crushed the heads of many of the little snakes, and many of his spells attained half-life, sparking and spitting over the heads of Harry’s creations. But though he was an accomplished Dark wizard and a Parselmouth, he was not an *absorbere*. That gift must have entered the Gaunt line—the Slytherin line—after his time.

Harry swallowed. For the first time that he could remember, he didn’t feel guilty about doing so. He consumed the magic as if it were food offered at a feast, and remembered that the shade of Slytherin would have destroyed him if he could have. His snakes took chunk after chunk of magic, and it flowed through their bodies and came to him, and he ate it and grew stronger, and that enabled him, in turn, to send stronger serpents forward.

Slytherin let out a noise that sounded like a scream of frustration. Then he clasped his hands together and fell into a long chant, ugly with twining sounds like mating rattlesnakes.

Harry made two of the snakes climb his legs and tear into the intangible flesh of him. His legs vanished, and the snakes fell back to the floor, but the damage was done, the spell disrupted. Slytherin’s eyes snapped open, and he stared at where his limbs had been, before lifting his head and staring at Harry with an expression that, for the first time, showed true fear.

“You would destroy the last bit of me,” he whispered. “The last remnant of me.”

Harry didn’t bother answering as two more of his serpents grew flaps of skin like kites around their heads. They soared upward in dizzying spirals and locked their fangs on either side of Slytherin’s face. A bite inward, and another bite inward, and they scooped out the flesh of his cheeks. He screamed. Harry scooped up the magic that came to him, Dark, but not tainted as so much of what Voldemort’s power was.

“Does it not matter to you that you are of my House?” Slytherin demanded abruptly. “Does it not matter to you that you carry my gift, however illegitimately you obtained it? Does it—“

And his words went garbled, as the serpents twined around him and ate his tongue, and he fell beneath the swarm. Harry swallowed the last parts of it, shuddering slightly. This magic was nearly a thousand years old, and, like fine wine, the age affected the taste.

And then it was done, Slytherin was gone, and the road to the ring was open. Harry could feel shock and silence like a heartbeat behind him, moving in muffled knocks against the shack’s walls.

He took a step forward, and bent over the ring. This close, he could see a faint strip of silver running around the top, separating the stone from the gold, and he could make out the dark, intense shimmer of power that had marked both the diary and the locket. He started to reach down to it.

And then *power* spoke, from the door of the shack, and Harry turned to see Voldemort there, with his magic flaring around him, and Lucius crouched next to him like a dog.

There was too much magic.

Narcissa had not ever imagined she would say that. She was, after all, the daughter of a pureblood family who had made a hobby of collecting magic and carrying it back home again, and of creating or fitting magical items to the heirs of their line. Always unspoken, in the back of her ancestors’ minds, Narcissa knew, had been the hope that one of their descendants would manage to become a Dark Lord or Lady by possession of artifacts alone.

But this magic was too much. It spread around the shack like a choking cloud, sinking into her lungs, stabbing her brain, making her drop to the floor despite her desire not to bow before such a creature. Tiny spots of blood welled to the surface all along her arms. Her brain stuttered to a stop, dragged into and bound within a world of sludge and dark crystal.

She saw her husband kneeling beside the Dark Lord, and met his eyes in comradeship. At the moment, she could not be angry at him for succumbing to the hold that Voldemort still had over him and running away. There was nothing but this magic in the

world, dominating her, dominating everyone who came in contact with it. She saw almost everyone around the room bow, one by one.

There were two exceptions. One was Harry, who still stooped over the blue stone that held the ring and glared at Voldemort.

And the other was Draco. Looking up through the flickering miasma that obscured her vision, Narcissa saw a net of silvery strands swirling out from Harry and aiming for Draco. In the face of such a crushing will as this, Harry reached first to protect his lover, lending such strength as would enable him to keep his feet.

Whether Draco knew that net of will was there or not, Narcissa didn't know. But he made the best use of it he could, drawing his wand and pointing it at Voldemort. A curse blasted from the tip, aimed straight at the Dark Lord.

"Lucius," said Voldemort lazily.

Her husband moved in between them and took the curse, which opened a long, bloody cut down his right arm. And the expression on Draco's face when he saw what he'd done to his father—a traitor and the man who had hurt both him and her, but still, his father—made Narcissa's heart vibrate like a struck bell.

It also seemed to weaken Draco's resolve to remain standing. He wavered, and nearly knelt. Harry hissed. The power flowing from him grew steadier, and Draco climbed back to his feet.

"It does not matter, Harry," said Voldemort, and the magic that surrounded him *made* his words truth. "What does it matter? You know that you will never leave this room with all of them alive. I can take Severus through his Dark Mark. I will break your adoptive Black. Your Weasleys, outside the house, are already mine, choking moment by moment on the thick air. Your little Light witch and your small Dark wizard cannot effectively fight me." He flashed Narcissa a smile that made the air burn and red afterimages burst in front of her eyes. "As for Mrs. Malfoy, I will have her husband rape her. It is a fitting end to such love as they once bore."

Harry breathed out, "And Draco?"

"Draco." The snake around his waist pivoted that way, and Voldemort gave a smile. It was wrong, Narcissa thought, a torture for any mother to have to see her son eyed in such a way. "He shall die inch by inch, Harry, and his magic will be mine. Meanwhile, his mind will be broken and twisted by the Imperius Curse until he knows nothing but pain and suffering." A delicate pause. "Of course, yield and come with me now, and you may spare him that fate, not to mention all those whom you love."

It is a trap, Narcissa thought, fighting to move her hand and close it around her wand. *Do not listen to him, Harry.*

And it seemed that Harry was not going to. He snarled, a noise that did not sound human, and his snakes appeared around the Dark Lord, attacking him with steel fangs and wide-distended jaws.

"These are the pets that you used to defeat my ancestor's shade?" Voldemort asked. "Impressive. But not impressive enough, I am afraid."

Narcissa felt him sweep the snakes from existence, swallowing Harry's magic. Harry staggered. Voldemort gave a low laugh, his snake's gaze fixed on his heir. Harry gritted his teeth and lifted a hand to his forehead, where his scar had begun to bleed.

Narcissa felt the pressure on her mind ease a little. Once again, she tried to move her hand towards her wand.

She quickly saw that she wasn't the only one who had decided to use the Dark Lord's distraction against him. Draco lifted his head slightly, and his eyes fluttered closed, in the slack expression that Narcissa knew meant he was trying to use his possession gift.

Voldemort stiffened, and then let out a shriek. He whirled around, however, and the rage burning on his face told Narcissa that he was not under Draco's control.

Draco choked as invisible fingers gripped his throat and urged his head backward. So fast did it tilt that for a moment, the worst moment of her life, Narcissa feared his neck was broken.

But then she realized it was not, because Draco's eyes still focused and still blazed defiance, and Voldemort whispered, "You will pay for that, child, pay with your blood and your sanity. But your magic, first of all." And Narcissa felt the gullet of his gift opening, preparing to swallow the power Draco had been born with and worked so hard to develop.

Harry snatched the ring from the anchor-stone with a yank, a yell, and a terrific flash of light. Voldemort turned towards him, snarling.

Narcissa knew the distraction was only minor. The Dark Lord would recover himself in a moment, and Harry would give up the ring to save Draco. Her son was more important to him than a piece of metal. It was entirely possible that Draco was more important to him than the fate of the world.

As it should be.

Narcissa studied Harry's face in that moment that seemed to go on forever, as Voldemort held Harry's lover and Harry held Voldemort's Horcrux, and green eyes and serpentine eyes regarded one another. She saw the fierce, the drowning love in Harry's expression, the rage and hatred he only felt towards those who might hurt Draco, and knew that if anyone could guarantee her son protection and a happy life after this moment, it would be Harry.

But after this moment, the balance would tilt, and Voldemort would win, because none of them had been able to guess how powerful he would be, that there was this level of magic in the world.

And in this moment, he was distracted, and his hold had lifted from Narcissa's heart and mind and hand.

She turned and fixed her eyes on her son as she drew her wand. Even choking, Draco looked more alive than Lucius did at that moment. His face shone with fury, and he was working furiously, throat and eyes alike, obviously trying to get past whatever barrier the Dark Lord had put in place and use his possession gift again.

Narcissa felt a deep peace moving through her. If she tried to interfere and free Draco, she would not succeed, and Voldemort would probably kill her.

But there was one thing she could do, one thing that would change this horrific balance, and, hopefully, make Harry react faster to the sudden change than Voldemort would.

She loved Draco, because he was her son. She loved Harry, for making Draco so happy. She fixed her mind on that, on the shining star of that, and not on the suspicion whispering in the back of her mind, that perhaps this was the vengeance of the broken threefold oath she had sworn. She had said she would bring Bellatrix to death, and she had not.

But she would never know the truth of that, and she did not wish to think of it now.

Warmth, affection, devotion spread through her, and to those rippling emotions she dedicated her death, the willing sacrifice.

"Avada Kedavra," she whispered.

The Killing Curse rose from her wand and struck her. She was aware of figures moving, lunging, whirling, and of at least one voice calling her name. She did not look up at them, but faced death calmly, eyes open, and met it as it came.

Narcissa Malfoy died loving.

Lucius saw his wife commit suicide.

And his outraged love rose, roaring, screaming, a whirling flood that bore the last chains of his hatred aside.

He was free.

He rolled over, painfully, well-aware that the bloodied curse wound on his upper arm would keep him from using the limb effectively, and tossed his wand to his other hand. Quickly, knowing what he had to do, and not listening to the voice that screamed in the back of his head, he aimed at the snake around the Dark Lord's waist, the one that allowed him to see.

He whispered the Severing Curse, and the snake flew apart in bloody chunks and died. Meanwhile, the screaming in the back of his head continued.

Narcissa, Narcissa, Narcissa.

Awkwardly, he planted his knees beneath him and struggled to his feet. Voldemort was screaming in a high-pitched voice, half-yell and half-hiss, and it would not be long before he reoriented himself and decided what he had to do. But Lucius again knew what *he* had to do, and would not let the moment escape.

He came to his wife's body, and gathered her up, her blonde hair tumbling loose about her neck, her face slack and peaceful. Her wand fell from her hand. Lucius hesitated a moment, then gathered it up with a muttered Levitation Spell, at the same time as he cast a Lightening Charm on Narcissa's corpse.

And all the while the voice sang in the back of his mind.

Narcissa, Narcissa, Narcissa.

Bitterness was flooding through him like corroding acid or poison, that it had taken him *this* long to awaken and realize his love was stronger than his hatred, that he had faced his wife and son in battle and seen her die before he could rend himself free. But he knew that he was beyond the clutch of Voldemort's slavery ever again. He hated even the Dark Lord less than he loved his wife.

Had loved her, for she was beyond his reach now.

He held her close, and turned to see what would happen, what miracle she had bought with her death.

Narcissa, Narcissa, Narcissa.

The room filled with sweet thunder.

Harry heard Draco scream Narcissa's name, and a moment later he saw the green light flash, heard the calm curse, even as he had more than three years ago when Sirius committed suicide in the same way and for the same reason.

Death out of love. A willing sacrifice.

The soft buzz of the Unassailable Curse around the Horcrux in his hand vanished.

Harry saw Voldemort's snake cleft apart in the next instant, and the Dark Lord was maddened, turning, trying to find a way to see, his magic rearing and lashing back and forth like trees in a storm, without direction.

Harry could not listen to his own pain. There was no time. He knelt, clutching the ring close, remembering what Regulus had said he needed to do once the willing sacrifice was accomplished. Drain the Horcrux's magic, drain the bit of Voldemort's soul inside it, as he had swallowed Tom Riddle and unraveled the shard lurking inside the locket. He gripped the Peverell ring firmly, and drove his *absorbere* ability like a knife into the stone, striking it and splitting it apart.

The ring foamed and crackled with dark lightning. Harry was preparing himself for the same blast of foulness that he remembered from the Chamber of Secrets and the Shrieking Shack, and was unprepared for the burst of pain that filled his hand instead.

He stared down through eyes gone suddenly blurry. The strip of silver that separated the stone of the ring from the gold had unfolded, revealing itself as a tiny serpent, and the serpent had bitten his right hand on the web of skin between his thumb and forefinger.

A ripple of poison spread from the bite, moving upwards, turning the skin black and spongy as it did so, seaming it with cracks that leaked white and green fluids. One moment, and it was solely located on the web of skin; the next, it had spread to cover the whole of the back of his hand.

Only then did Harry feel the sweet thunder of the prophecy in the room, and remember the second verse of the chant Trelawney had given him.

*The first thing is the smallest thing,
But the center of many hearts still.
But, oh, savior, watch for the sting,
For the smallest things may kill.*

His vision whirled, and darkened, and then expanded in odd ways. Harry found himself standing on a flat plain of black sand beneath an arching gray sky. Behind him were the glittering silver pools of his Occlumency, the foliage of his emotions, the steel skeleton of his rebuilt mind.

In front of him, regarding him with burning eyes, was Tom Riddle, looking a few months older than the memory Harry had seen in the diary, and far madder and more dangerous.

“Your body is going to be mine,” he hissed, and then he leaped forward, and so the battle began.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Angels of Our Better Natures

Snape saw Harry fall.

The wave of blackness traveling up his right arm commanded his attention next, and he had to watch as the skin seamed with cracks, as liquids leaked down them, as Harry began to die of a particularly virulent poison that must be the mix of several different kinds of venom. Snape knew from the movement, at least, that the poison was making for his shoulder, and from there it would turn for his heart. If it reached his heart, then he was dead and the matter done with.

He saw the Dark Lord whirling in place, having felt the destruction of his Horcrux, and having not the slightest idea what to do next.

Snape made the decision he had to, and, instead of rushing at once to his son’s side and cradling him in his arms, he drew his wand the way Lucius had and cast the one spell that would do the most good then. When the Dark Lord was in a mood such as this, balanced between one emotion and the next, a push in one direction or the other could send him into the desired action. Snape had used this delicate balance to his advantage several times when he was still a Death Eater and wanted to get one of his rivals in trouble.

He cast a spell that allowed him to imitate another’s voice, and called out in the unmistakable tones of Mad-Eye Moody, “Harry! Are you in here, lad? We’ve got the ward-stones that you asked for, the pieces of the Stone that are immune to magic!”

Voldemort snarled silently, and Snape caught a glimpse of his ruined eyes. He waited tensely. It was possible that he had sent Voldemort into rage instead of caution, and that the Dark Lord would attack now. If he did, they were all dead, but that had been true from the moment he entered the Gaunt house.

But he fell from the horns of his dilemma into cautious fear, as Snape had hoped he would. He spread his arms and half-bowed his head, and vanished with a crackle of magic so deep it wasn’t the crack of Apparition.

Snape let out a harsh breath, and then permitted himself to rush to Harry’s side, only to find that Regulus had already rushed there and taken him up, being careful not to jostle his right arm. Currently, he was prying at Harry’s right hand, trying to make him let go of the Peverell ring he clutched.

“Do *not*,” Snape said harshly, and tapped Regulus’s hand with his wand, making him snatch it away and glare. “Otherwise it shall poison you, too, and I don’t fancy having two patients to treat.”

Regulus’s eyes widened with just the slightest bit of hope. “Do you think you can cure him, then?”

Snape’s mouth twisted in a dark curve, but he could hardly keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Why else did I become a Potions Master, if not to brew antivenin for recklessly careless boys on the edge of death?” He turned away from the argument that Regulus would have made at that, and scanned the room. His gaze alighted first on Rosier-Henlin and Gloryflower, hovering near the back of the room and clutching their left arms. Their lightning bolt scars would hurt, he knew, telling them too late, futilely, that Harry was in danger.

“Go collect the Weasleys,” he snapped, and they scurried out the door, seeming happy for the task.

He looked then at the Malfoys. Lucius stood with Narcissa in his arms, her long hair draping his shoulders and extending almost to the floor in a curtain of gold. Snape stared into his eyes, using a swift Legilimency probe, and managed to satisfy himself that this was not another plant of the Dark Lord’s. Even if Voldemort had told Lucius to rejoin their side on the incredible chance of Narcissa’s suicide, he would not have wanted to encourage such a thing, Snape thought, not when a suicide like this meant the

possible destruction of a Horcrux. He would have commanded Lucius to stop her, first.

Draco stood next to his father, the back of one hand laid on his mother's cheek, his face older than Snape had ever seen it. He would have thought the chisel of this pain had chipped away the final part of the boy's childhood, did he not think Draco still had an immense amount of childishness to lose.

"We are going to Hogwarts," Snape said, and the sound of his voice, like a dry branch snapping, made Lucius look up at him. Snape made sure to hold his eyes as he continued. "We will be Apparating to the Hogsmeade road and going straight to the hospital wing, with both Harry and your wife. Do you understand, Lucius?"

Lucius, to his credit, simply nodded instead of protesting. Draco opened his mouth as if he would do it for his father, but Snape didn't care, didn't have the time to attend to the devastation in Draco's eyes and on his face. He was already whirling and striding through the door of the shack, Regulus following closely behind him with Harry clutched in his arms.

They could return to Hogwarts, but while the rest of them went to the hospital wing, Snape would go to his lab, there to brew the potion that would have to race against time and the blackness creeping up Harry's right arm, and save his son's life.

Harry floated just beneath the surface of the silver Occlumency pool, and listened to Tom Riddle's footsteps coming nearer and nearer.

"Come out, come out, Harry," the older boy called, giving away both his impatience and his position through his voice. Harry would have smiled if he had considered the battle as anything but intolerably serious. "You know that mine is the stronger magic, and mine is the possession gift. I promise you that I can kill quickly when I want to, though. Come to me, and I'll give you one of those quick deaths."

Harry stayed where he was. He didn't have to breathe in this world, something he didn't think Tom Riddle had yet realized; he was still treating the mental battlefield more as if it were a physical one. Well, and why not? He couldn't have had much contact with other minds for the last few decades he'd been cooped up in the Peverell ring.

A shadow passed above Harry, a leg reaching out to stride over the pool. He gathered his strength, forced away thoughts of what was happening to Draco right now and how his body was probably dying from the bite of the snake on the ring, and exploded upward.

Tom swore in startlement as Harry grabbed him and threw him down, his magic writhing around him at the same time to form chains out of the ground around the pool. The chains had jade links and metal cuffs at the end, two of which Harry managed to snap into place around Tom's ankles before he reacted.

He extended one hand in front of him and snarled a single word Harry didn't recognize, with a lot of r sounds in it. Harry bent double as someone invisible punched him in the solar plexus, and he had to roll away from Tom, hearing the other boy's laughter ringing in his ears.

"This is a nice body that you have here, Harry," the bastard said, his voice flavored with glee. "I rather like it. I'll enjoy possessing it when you're gone. I wonder how long I should leave it before I tell them who I really am? I can counter the poison that's killing you, of course, and reclaim the use of my right arm, but I can't do that too obviously. Hmmm."

Harry forced himself to ignore the pain. This was the kind of battle he'd trained for under Lily, in some ways; at least, he had the experience to know he shouldn't do things like waste his breath in talking. And no matter how confident Tom was, he was chained now, and he didn't have enough control of Harry's mind yet to imagine his bonds unraveling with a thought.

Harry scrambled back to one knee and imagined an attack coming from above, as he had come from beneath a moment ago. A flight of birds, all of them toothed and lizard-tailed as was the bird that symbolized the connection between them, swooped down towards Tom, shrieking.

He flung out a hand, hissing another spell, and the birds turned to floating masses of charred flesh and feathers.

This time, Harry called on his memory of Indigena's vines that had held him helpless in the graveyard almost two Midwinters ago, asking them to writhe up and coil around Tom's wrists, binding his magic and keeping him from using it against the next weapons that Harry might lift. They came out, but Tom charred them in turn. Harry snarled in frustration.

The beetle-black eyes fixed on his, smiling. Or maybe they weren't beetle-black, Harry thought, but bottle-green, a slightly darker shade of his own. They shared so much else, why not this? "Did you think that you could fight me, Harry?" Tom whispered. "We are much the same, you and I. And I am more determined than you will ever be, Darker. You cannot fight the Dark with Light, Harry, but that's what you're trying to do. No wonder it isn't working!"

He reached out and drew a line in the air with his finger, laughing. Harry felt a burning wound open on his forehead, parallel to the lightning bolt scar, and knew it would continue down, severing his eyelid, blinding him in his right eye, and carving his face apart. Tom could call on things like that, wounds that were fatal or disfiguring, and Harry couldn't.

Or, rather, he wasn't doing it right now.

He plunged his face into the cool dirt that formed the "ground" of his mind, and rubbed out the pain and the spell. Tom made a disappointed cluck like a mother hen who'd lost a chick. Harry, meanwhile, was considering what he now suspected to be the truth, at least if Tom was telling it.

Why should he? You know he's a liar. He's always been.

Except when he gloats, he thought then, remembering back to when Voldemort had happily told him the truth about cutting off his hand in the graveyard, and actually kept his word about the thirteen days he would wait before attacking Hogwarts on Midsummer. Voldemort lied when he had need of it, but he preferred to tell the truth when he thought that would cause despair in his enemies.

And Tom Riddle thought this would cause despair in Harry. He hadn't had the chance to get to know Harry very well yet, certainly not as well as the elder Voldemort, and so he didn't know, couldn't know, that Harry had the weapon to make his taunt a reality.

If I dare to use it.

Harry did not want to, any more than he wanted to imagine a gruesome death for an intruder in his mind. It was not the way his thoughts ran, not the way his imagination worked. It—he did not wish to use his magic that way.

And then a wound opened on his back, and hands dug in with the seeming intention of taking out his internal organs, and Harry realized he might have to change his mind—and quickly.

Draco followed his father to the hospital wing, but, once there, it was too hard watching Madam Pomfrey attend to Harry and ignore Narcissa. Of course, he knew it was only right and proper, and he was frantically worried for Harry, too—the double emotional wounds felt as if they were draining him of any chance of happiness—but it just reinforced the impression that his mother was dead, and didn't allow him to escape from it.

He stood there, head hanging, unable to muster any will to move past the pain. Narcissa had always been part of his life. Every time he thought of what he should do next, it included an orientation towards her, if only assuming that she would be there somewhere, and he could call on her if he needed her help. Knowing she wasn't there, now, was like hitting a wall with his head over and over again.

"Draco."

Draco turned, blinking, and saw his father standing there. His gaze was steady, but compelling, and Draco knew what he was asking. Reconciliation, shared grief, a talk of *some* kind. Or to go to a room where Madam Pomfrey, and even Regulus, wouldn't stare at him as if he were a Death Eater come again.

Slowly, Draco decided that he could do this. He nodded, and moved past Lucius, motioning for him to follow.

Narcissa did not follow them.

Draco glanced back at her once, and saw her still face, and her rippled hair, a bit darker than sunshine, and then resolutely faced forward and decided that he wasn't going to look again.

He led Lucius to one of the classrooms that usually served as a place to practice dueling spells. It wasn't occupied today, thank Merlin, and Draco turned around to face his father when they'd shut the door behind him.

“I don’t know what you want,” Draco said bluntly. “I don’t know what you expect of me. But you should know one thing. We’re going to have a *proper* funeral for Mother. She’s going to be buried with all the honor that befits a death like that. And if you say otherwise, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

He honestly felt as if he could do it, too. The magical strength he’d honed and sharpened in preparation, as he thought, for defending Harry while he retrieved the Horcruxes was swimming to the surface now, focusing on Lucius. He could open his mouth, and the words *Avada Kedavra* would come forth, and he could slay his father. He almost thought it would be better that way. It would solve the wretched question of what to do with Lucius, at any rate.

“She always wanted a Malfoy funeral,” Lucius said calmly. “To be buried like one of us, not burned as a Black. Unless you think that would not do enough honor to her and her death.”

He wasn’t fighting, Draco realized then, dimly. He wasn’t saying that Draco couldn’t have the funeral he wanted for his mother. He was agreeing. He was—he was honoring Narcissa the way that a loving husband would have done.

Draco took a staggering step backwards, barely remembering to flick his wand so that he could conjure a chair in time to meet his sudden impulse to sit. He sank into it and tilted his head back, harsh laughter bubbling past his lips. He felt Lucius staring at him. He didn’t care.

“Draco,” his father said sharply. “Stop. You are growing hysterical.”

“I don’t fucking care,” Draco pointed out, and leaned his forehead on his hand. “I just—*damn you, damn you, damn you!* You loved her, and you could never tell her that while she was *alive*, could you? It was only when she died that you broke free, a few moments too late to tell her that, oh, by the way, you actually have a loving husband, Narcissa. Everything’s too late with you, Father, isn’t it? Curdled, half-baked, half-arsed.”

“Draco, I will not—“

Draco slammed his hand down on the chair’s arm and leaned forward, glaring at his father. “Tell me why I should let you have *any* say in Mother’s funeral, dear father,” he whispered. “Tell me why, for that matter, we should let you back into the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, when you’ve caused enough trouble for any seven wizards. Explain to me why you tore free from your chains when you know what’s going to happen now. Honoria Pemberley could demand a severed leg in return for the one you cut off her, and she would be within her rights. Tell me why I should treat you like a father, Lucius, and the husband of my mother, and not like an enemy combatant.”

Snape held the smells of the poison leaking from Harry’s arm in his mind as he tossed a handful of powdered moonstone into the cauldron.

It smells of almonds. There is cyanide within it, but diluted, so that it will not kill in the first few moments. And there is arsenic, too. That smell, I know.

A handful of powdered bicorn horn followed the moonstone, and then pounded heal-all leaves, and then crushed violet petals. Snape worked on the level of instinct, not questioning what his hands added, or how much. He knew the amounts and the ingredients would have to be perfect. The venom was advancing up Harry’s arm towards his heart in a wave of blackness. When it reached his heart, then the heart would stop, and the chance to save his son would be gone. The damage was slowing as it spread, because it had more skin to cover, but it was advancing even still, even now.

He spun to the left, snatched a vial of healing potion off his prepared shelves, and tossed it into the cauldron with the rest. He heard a spark behind him, and a soft hiss, but he smelled no released, poisonous fumes. That was good. He did not have time to deal with them.

Water went in next, enough water to fill the cauldron nearly to overflowing, and Snape chanted a purification spell only after it had thoroughly mixed with the other ingredients, so that it would add no contamination of its own. He dived among his stores, searching for the bottle he had created more than ten years ago.

Yes. Yes, there it is.

In a glass vial hung a single sparkling hair, found in the Forbidden Forest, caught on a branch—a hair from the tail of a unicorn. If

he had taken it by force from the beast, he would not have dared to add it. It would have increased the effectiveness of the poison, instead of healing Harry. Just as there was a cost to drinking unicorns' blood, there was a cost to using other pieces of the wondrous creatures stolen from them, instead of picked up from the careless or the dead ones.

He broke the vial and drifted the hair into the cauldron. It settled with a faint glow of light, and for just a moment, the noise of bells and a sensation of perfect peace came to Snape.

“Lie there,” he told it, knowing he sounded ridiculous addressing a potion ingredient and not caring, “and heal the man who freed you, all of you.”

One more whirl and a stride back to the shelves, and he found the final thing he was looking for, the thing his instincts, not presenting their reasoning to the higher brain, told him to add. A bright, battered feather, a phoenix feather, the very same one Dumbledore had given him decades ago when he welcomed an embittered, exhausted young Severus Snape into the Order of the Phoenix.

The feather came to rest on the top of the water. At once, it burst into shimmering white fire, fighting the liquid and boiling some of it away. Snape scooped up a handful of water and dumped it over the plume, and the flames subsided with a little hiss. But they had served to boil some of the potion and mix the individual ingredients in it more closely, which was, so far as Snape could tell, what they were supposed to do.

Doubts tried to creep in—doubts and rationality—but Snape did not let them. He seized a glass stirring rod and dipped it into the cauldron, beginning to brew. He had his mind fixed on the result—a potion that could save Harry from the poison killing him—and he did not care how he got there.

His hands took over, the knowledge spreading out from his arms and not his thoughts. Snape let them do so.

Harry rolled over, stealing the victory from the brass-clawed creature Tom had conjured to plague him, and stifled the temptation to burst into phoenix song. If Tom was right, then he couldn't fight him with Light magic. He knew where he had to go, knew what he had to do.

Of course, it was hard, knowing that he might defeat the madman trying to possess his body only to unleash a worse darkness on the world.

But he had to try. Draco needed him to come out of this mental landscape, this battle, alive, so that he could comfort him.

Harry dug his hands into the rich soil and snapped his fingers around the clods of earth he held. The ground quivered, and then sank away beneath Tom, dumping him on his arse. Harry heard his cry, more startled and indignant than hurt.

At the same time, Harry melted the chains that held him, and scrambled to his feet.

It would have to be a race. He would have to convince Tom that he was so frightened he was simply fleeing from him, without looking where he was going, and make him incensed enough to follow along without trying to get ahead of Harry. Dumping him on his arse should do that, Harry hoped. Voldemort had never been at his most rational when he was feeling laughed at.

Sure enough, there came a surge of darkness and wind after him, letting Harry know Tom was on his trail.

He ran, then. He flickered among the soft landscape of the Occlumency pools, dancing over their surfaces, feeling, now and then, a drowned emotion rising towards the surface, asking if he needed it, but dismissing the feeling each time. He leaped from branch to branch of the mighty tree that had the steel skeleton as its spine, and then ducked into the leaves while Tom cried in frustration behind him. He climbed higher and higher, and saw the rustling foliage part ahead of him, baring the way to the part of his mind he knew so little of and hated so much.

He turned the hatred into fear and sent it flowing behind him like a wind, and he felt Tom laughing, his confidence restored.

“I told you, Harry,” he called, while he scrambled up a branch Harry had passed several minutes ago. “If you come to me, I'll give you a quick death, and you can be assured that I'll use your body well. It won't be as quick as it would have been if you had just surrendered the first time I asked, but it will still be swift. And then you won't be alive to see what I do with your boyfriend.” Another snort of laughter, turning colder and higher-pitched as it went, as if the exercise were moving this shard of Tom Riddle closer and closer to his future self.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. *Draco*.

But he did not have to listen, and so he did not. He ran, and the leaves beneath his feet firmed and flattened and changed into rocks. Now he was pelting across flagstones, heading for the wide fence that reared at the very end of this plain.

A thought, and the fence expanded, blocking his way, though in reality Harry could slip past it and into another part of his mind if he wanted. He projected panic, though, and ran back and forth along the fence as if it were a barrier he didn't know how to get past.

"There you are, Harry."

He whirled. Tom Riddle was not far behind him, and coming fast, a sly smile on his face that didn't work well with the dirt smudged there. Harry held back the impulse to laugh. He knew well enough that if he started now, he wouldn't stop. The emotions about Narcissa's death and Draco's grief were fighting under the surface, trying to emerge any way they could.

Harry stamped on them, and then shrank back against the fence as Tom Riddle came closer and closer.

"No place left to run?" the other wizard whispered mockingly. "No way left to fight me? Well, I'm pleased to see that you recognize your own helplessness after all, and your fitting end as a vessel for me."

Harry panted, and then let the breath out as a sharp whine. It masked the sounds gathering behind him.

Tom Riddle came closer and closer, and finally halted in front of him. His eyes were dark and expressive, and deep green after all, if one looked closely enough. His face shone with enjoyment.

"I'll make you more powerful than you've ever been, Harry, I promise," he whispered, and reached out as if to caress Harry's cheek.

Harry seized his hand, pulling him close, and then reached out and wrapped his other arm around Tom's torso. The other boy, startled, struggled against him, but he didn't have enough of a purchase to resist. Harry made the fence vanish, and then he threw them both forward, aiming for where the fence had been.

They sank into black water, into the part of his mind where Harry kept the darkest part of himself. He whistled.

And the part of him that desired nothing more than to rend and tear and dominate came to him.

"I have changed," Lucius said.

"Really." Draco felt incredulity, and then indignation, go through him like a spear of glass. "And I should believe that?" His father nodded slightly, never taking his eyes from his face. Draco laughed again, but managed to cut it off this time. "Why?"

"Because I have been a slave for the past four months," said Lucius, and his voice sharpened with an emotion Draco could believe out of him: bitterness. "I have seen what it cost me not to have enough—love—to resist my hatred." At least he still grimaced when saying the word, Draco thought. He would have been convinced this was not Lucius if he didn't. "And though I came too late to let Narcissa know what she meant to me, that does not mean I need to live my life in regret. I would rather do something else with it."

"And what is that?" One wrong word, Draco promised himself, *one*, and he would kill him. This was the man who had tried desperately to control Draco's own life, to prevent his wife from leaving him when she'd had enough, to imprison Hawthorn Parkinson and then to wreck Harry's rebellion. Draco could not trust his promises, and he certainly did not trust Lucius's own apparent need to make up for his crimes.

"Make up for what happened."

Draco snorted.

"I can," said Lucius, not wavering, either in his stare or in his body. "I can do this, if you will permit it, Draco."

Draco rubbed his hands against his legs. He had never thought he would receive submission from his father, not in his wildest dreams. It felt—wrong. But, he reminded himself, he was the head of the Malfoy line now, and he was dealing with an erring member of his family.

That told him how to act. He lifted his head, and recalled what he'd learned of the pureblood rituals for this in his mad rush, during the summer after his third year and later, to educate himself in what should have been his heritage so that he could catch up with Harry. "And what will you do, in the name of the Dark?" he asked, his voice already firmer than it had been.

Lucius recognized the formula. His eyes flashed once, but Draco thought it was with satisfaction rather than anger.

And then he knelt, but with one knee only, which was the posture of qualified submission, rather than the absolute, dog-like one he'd taken at Voldemort's side. He spread his arms, bowing his head so that his curtain of long blond hair partially shielded his face. He murmured, "Is it to be up to me to name the penances for my crimes?"

Draco considered rising to his feet, but decided that he liked sitting. It increased the chair's resemblance to a throne, and, he hoped, impressed Lucius with how much he needed to make up for. "It is," he said. "I will not name penances that would not go deep enough, would not make you truly sorry."

Lucius nodded. "Very well. Then, for the crime of not acknowledging your own adulthood, I will live on your sufferance. Whatever food I eat, whatever bed I sleep in, whatever breath I draw, comes from you and you alone. Should you require my life from me, I will give it, without hesitation or question."

Draco hissed between his teeth, nearly amused in spite of himself. It was a contract that tied him as deeply to Lucius as it tied Lucius to him. While Lucius would have to beg if his son declared it so, it also meant that if he starved or suffered, it would be Draco's fault.

But it was also the utmost price he could pay for lacking respect for his son, and therefore Draco could only ask a lesser one, if he challenged it. "That will be acceptable," said Draco. "And for your crimes against Hawthorn Parkinson, an ally who had never done you harm?"

"I will get her back from the Dark Lord."

Draco narrowed his eyes. He knew how many sources of hatred tied the werewolf to her new service: Lucius, of course, but also, from what Harry had told him, Indigena Yaxley, and the Aurors she had helped to torture and kill in the raid on Tullianum. Draco did not see how it was possible for her to return.

"You truly think you can manage that?" he murmured. The one making reparations, as Lucius was, was not allowed to choose a task he knew he would fail at.

"Of course, or I would not have offered," said Lucius, tilting his head to the side to look at Draco again through his curtain of hair.

If he can do it, then Harry would value it more than any other price he could name. "That will be acceptable," Draco repeated. He felt Lucius relax. *He must really think he can do it, strange as that seems.* "And what about your crimes against Harry?"

"My fortune and my magic are his to command," said Lucius, without a blink. "I shall become a Squib if he so desires it."

Draco narrowed his eyes. That threw the decision back on Harry, but he could hardly dispute it, because that was the punishment Harry had said he would offer someone who broke the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow in the first place. "Bastard," he accused.

"The son of a bastard, perhaps, if my father was truly born of a Mudblood woman," said Lucius, his voice inexpressibly calm. "But in and of myself? I think not. My parents were wed."

Draco gritted his teeth, and did not respond to that. "You are his, then? As much as you are mine?"

"Secondary only to your claims are his claims on me," Lucius said, his voice polished and perfect.

Draco sat back, thinking. He could not truly think of anything else that Lucius needed to atone for, since his other crimes had been committed under Voldemort's command. If Narcissa had still been alive, she would have the right to claim her share from him, but—

If Narcissa were alive, many things would be different.

“Stand,” said Draco abruptly. “For my part, you are accepted back into the Malfoy line. But I don’t know that Harry will let you live, let alone accept you back into his alliance.”

“I serve at his pleasure,” Lucius said quietly, and climbed to his feet.

Draco leaned back in his chair and gave in to his curiosity, since if he didn’t, he feared the tears lurking at the back of his eyes would rush him. “Why would you? You said that you spent four months in slavery. Are you really all that eager to spend more months in service to us, to make up for what you’ve done?”

“I chose this,” Lucius answered. “That makes it different.” He cocked his head, his face altering. “And now, Draco, you should mourn.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know what your mother was,” Lucius said in a hiss. “Far more than the woman who bore you. The finest witch I ever knew. The woman who had the strength and courage to give up her life for a *reason*, not thrashing in a futile fight against old age or stabbed from behind in battle. She lived and she died like a Dark pureblood, Draco, and it is not fitting that her son’s face is free of tears when he thinks of her.”

Draco turned his head away and closed his eyes, but it was too late; the sobs were already welling up. He stood, prepared to leave the room. He could not show such weakness in front of Lucius.

And then he realized that Lucius, too, wept, but silently, the tears falling down his face like drops melting off an icicle, his eyes wide and frozen and staring between them. Draco hesitated for a long moment between his father and the door.

Then he turned around, and clasped Lucius’s hand with a rough motion.

Lucius drew him close, and held him there, not exactly as a father held a son—not yet, they had not come back to that yet—but as a man might hold another while they mourned for a woman they had both loved.

The water sloshed nearly to the rim of the cauldron, and then fell back again. It was now purple, now blue, now green, all deep and jeweled colors. Certainly, it was the most *beautiful* potion Snape had ever brewed.

He did not attempt to stop the thoughts, or sink them into his Occlumency pools, even though he could have. He was in full flight through the creative part of his brain that usually helped him brew potions, but here, he was making it work at high speed, the way it usually did only when offering theories.

His hands flew, now stirring counterclockwise, now flicking his wand to add a heating or a cooling or a stabilizing spell that his mind told him was needed just then, now bending to add a puff of his breath or a strand of hair to the potion. He did not question his instincts. He did not try to stop, or slow down. He trusted his intuition to bear him along, and it did, steady beneath him as a galloping horse, guiding him over the jumps he could not have taken alone.

The notions of what he had to do swung around a different path, and Snape dipped off a good portion of the potion in a ladle and then let it drop back. The liquid puffed and turned red.

Red as blood, red as the blood that would have to spill if Harry died from the poison creeping up his arm...

And then he was over that, past it, soaring beyond it, forcing himself to concentrate on the potion, and not whether it would work or whether Harry would live or die. His hand moved in a smooth arc, dropping the first new ingredient for some time, a quetzal feather, into the potion.

The liquid shuddered as if in delight, and then stilled, and became utterly calm, glass-like, smooth. Snape knew what was next. The potion was ready. It would heal the corruption, drive back the venom, because it had to and that was what it was made for.

He Levitated the cauldron with a flick of his wand, and then guided it out the door of his lab and towards the hospital wing. He did not let the surface so much as tremble. It would not do to let that happen, no. So it was not going to happen. His gaze fixed on

the potion, and by sheer force he did not let the cauldron even bob so as to jostle it.

He entered the hospital wing, and his focused silence was enough to make Madam Pomfrey and Regulus, both still crowded around Harry's bed, move aside. Snape set the cauldron floating above Harry's head, and then said, in a voice that he made sure would not ripple across the surface, "Open his mouth."

Regulus scrambled to do so. One moment he might have bumped the cauldron, but Snape lifted it higher, and then lowered it again once Regulus was out of the way. Snape then tipped the potion.

It flowed over Harry, splashing in his hair, flowing into his mouth, soaking his corrupted arm, which was now black and spongy flesh almost to the shoulder. The liquids soaking from the cracks in the skin hissed mightily, and a cloud of steam surged up. Luckily, Snape didn't need to tell Madam Pomfrey to contain the fumes; her wand was already moving up and down and sideways in order to do so. And Regulus reached out through the flood of blood-like potion and massaged Harry's throat, making sure that he swallowed what got into his mouth. On and on the cascade went, until Harry was drenched.

Snape sat back when it was done, and made the surface of his mind serene and unrippled in and of itself with the help of his Occlumency pools. Now came the time to use them, when without them he would panic.

"What happens now?" Regulus whispered.

"Now?" Snape lifted an eyebrow, never taking his eyes from his son, who had started to shiver slightly. "Now, we wait."

Harry rolled, half-tossing Tom forward in the dark water, and then loosing him. He felt the creature that dwelt in the blackness, the *will* of that blackness, reach forward and grasp him.

Then Harry struck for the surface. He heaved himself out on the stones next to the pool, already thinking that he should return to his body as soon as possible. He had to find out where Draco had gone, what had happened to him. Draco would need him now, he knew.

A splash from the pool attracted his attention, and Harry swung sharply around. Tom Riddle was already almost back onto the shore, soaking with the water as if with tar, but still alive and with a horrible expression on his face.

What's the matter? Harry thought frantically. *I know the darkness can destroy him. That's what it likes to do. Why isn't it—*

And then he remembered. When he had used this darkness against Voldemort, his own will had still had to direct it. Without him, it was nothing but a collection of all the foulness and the sadistic impulses present in him.

He choked back a sob, lunged forward, and grabbed Tom around the throat, squeezing firmly, bearing him back into the darkness.

Tom's eyes widened almost comically, and his hands flailed, trying to reach up and stop Harry. Harry concentrated, though, and a tentacle coiled around his waist from beneath the water.

Tom tried to speak, but he'd lost his breath. He choked. The darkness tugged on him, slowly eating him alive. Now and then he shuddered and screamed, and Harry surmised that came from the darkness getting a particularly good bite in.

He had to hold him there. He had to want to watch Tom Riddle in pain. He had to want to watch him die.

Harry hesitated, and Tom surged back up again, nearly climbing out again as the darkness lost its strength. Harry swallowed another sob, and reminded himself that this desire to kill was him, too, part of him, and pressed down with all his strength, hearing his knuckles creak as his fingers tightened on the skin.

It was horrible, to watch Tom's face go blue, to hear the muffled screams he tried to make, and to watch more and more of his body slowly eaten alive by the creeping lake. Harry knew that, although he could not see the teeth rising and falling down there, he commanded them. They did what they did because he wanted them to do it.

And it was wonderful.

Harry couldn't deny the curl of dark satisfaction in his belly as he watched one of his enemies die so *easily*. No dancing around, no games of persuasion, no elaborate traps. Just the death, the chewing, and the absorption of the shard of soul into himself. He

could drown the Darkness within his own Light if he wished, but what if he didn't want to? He could let it shine forth like a black diamond instead. It would hardly frighten away his allies, and many of those who opposed him already thought of him as a Dark wizard. They would hardly blink at having their opinions confirmed.

He leaned forward and strained, bearing Tom down.

And then he was gone, sliding violently beneath the surface, as the darkness ate him and then tried to swarm out further, and take over Harry's brain.

Harry reared like a wild horse, fighting back the darkness. Yes, it would feel good to let it go, and stop caring so *much* about the consequences of his actions, and only love a few people, like Draco did, instead of everyone.

Draco.

And Harry remembered who was at the center of his thoughts, the sanity of them, and clung to the image of his lover, using it to pull himself back from the selfish desire to give in. Draco had lost one of the few people in the world he loved. What he must be feeling now would be shattering. He needed Harry to come back and comfort him.

Darkness pivoted and turned all around him, and Harry blasted through it, and opened his eyes with a gasp.

He heard a clang as his clenched fingers opened and the ring—harmless now, a drained and cracked Horcrux—fell to the floor. And then he caught a glimpse of Snape's face, in the moment before he was wrapped tight in his guardian's arms and held.

"The poison stopped," Snape whispered.

Harry tried to answer, he really did, but his right arm hurt like unholy fire, and he could only manage a choked cry. He glanced sideways, and grimaced. From shoulder to hand, his skin was black, spongy and soft, cracked, though the liquids were no longer leaking out of it as they had been.

Snape sat back, carefully. "We can save your arm," he told Harry, following his gaze. "But I don't know how long it will be until you have the full functioning of it back again."

"I got used to using only my right hand before," said Harry. "I'll get used to using just my left. Thank you for saving my life, sir." He held Snape's eyes in a moment so intense that Snape leaned away from him, looking shaken. Harry sat up, and ignored the screaming drag of his arm over the blankets. "Where's Draco?"

"With his father." Snape tried to press him back into the pillows. "Harry, you need to rest—"

"He needs me," said Harry, and waved his left hand, causing the blankets to rise and wrap around his right arm. It would do for a bandage until he had time to slow down and look for a proper one. "He just saw his mother die in front of him."

Snape's eyes fired with irritation. "And you just fought Tom Riddle in your mind, and—"

"And I'm *fine*," Harry pointed out. It wasn't as though any of them would ever know about the darkness he carried. He would have told them, just as he would have told them about so many things, if he could be sure they would listen in silence. But they would argue, he knew, just as they had argued after the strike at Cornwall, and arguments about his emotions wearied him to the bone. Besides, Draco needed his strength far more right now than Harry needed to lie back and contemplate, just as Connor had needed it after their parents were killed. "*Point Me* Draco Malfoy," he added to the silver ring on his left hand, the one that Draco had given him for their first joining ritual.

The ring vibrated, and then tugged his hand in the direction of the hallway. Harry nodded, and climbed out of his bed.

"Harry—"

"*Thank you, sir*," Harry said, to make it clear that he didn't want to be ungrateful about Snape saving his life, he just had more important things to do right now, and then strode out the door. His arm hurt furiously. *Well, let it.*

Draco lifted his head when the door opened. As long as Lucius was showing grief, he could, too, but he didn't want to do it in front of someone else.

Then he realized Harry stood there, and then Harry crossed the room and caught him close with both arms, and then he knew that he didn't have to put up the strong façade anymore. He caught Harry's left arm and drew it more firmly around him, letting his head fall back on his shoulder. He knew this mood of Harry's because he'd seen it with Connor after Lily and James died. Harry would kill to defend him. Right at the moment, nothing in the whole world was more important to him than Draco was, and that, *that*, was the balm Draco needed after seeing his mother die.

"I'm here, Draco," Harry whispered. "Whatever you need, whatever you want from me, I'm here to provide it."

"Don't kill Lucius right now," Draco whispered back. "Just send him away. And take me some place I can weep, Harry, and don't ever let me go."

"You have it," Harry said, and then he was being escorted away, down a hall that he knew would end in the Slytherin common room, where Harry would shield him from stares and whispers, and then their bedroom.

And then, there, he finally gave in and let himself truly weep, feeling Harry's fingers combing through his hair, hearing his voice whisper constantly into his ear.

"I'm so sorry, Draco. Whatever you need from me, you'll have it."

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: All Honor to the Brave

Her Lord had already started creating another snake, brewing the flesh of his latest victims in a burrow beneath the burrow rather than adding it to his great pattern. Indigena stood waiting for a time, but, though he was blind again, he did not need her now; his magic worked through his other senses to let him know what to do, and his grim determination and the newly swallowed power would be the reasons he accomplished this.

Thus, she slipped quietly away and up to the surface, to the section of ground she'd begun to cultivate. Nowhere she lived was home without a garden.

The soil was thick with spells that she'd cast to hold back the October chill and the frosts and make the flowers bloom. She was using mostly magical plants, but even they were more responsive to the natural conditions around them than most wizards and witches realized. She so far had three rows of the vines that bound wandless magic, a few roses like the ones around her wrist whose thorns would send forth deadly poison, a cutting from her grandmother's bell-bush that would, focused well enough, eventually tell them the state of Harry's health and power, and another bush, her special child.

Indigena knelt down next to that one and ran her hand over the shiny green leaves, small and triangular. They unfolded with a rustle and swayed towards her. Indigena smiled, well-aware that tears were burning in her eyes and she did not know why.

No. That is not true. You know why you weep. But you also know that it is not the reason that you should weep, because Lucius is gone from your master's side and one Horcrux is destroyed and that makes his defeat more certain.

She ignored the thoughts, and held her palm over the center of the bush, where the stem whirled up into a flat expanse of wood. The bush danced as much as it could when rooted and with no wind, eager to do her bidding.

Indigena let out her breath. This would be the first test for her little one, and she wished she had been able to do it under less serious circumstances, because she wanted this to be perfect.

She called up images of white flowers, of water, of lovely women, and gave them all to the bush in a concentrated burst of thought.

The bush swayed back and forth, slowly at first, and then faster. Indigena felt it drawing on her magic, the leaves curling beneath her skin and connecting with the tendrils there. She petted the little one with her free hand, shutting her eyes as the communion grew deeper, richer, and flooded the world behind her skull with green. This was the kind of magic that most Dark wizards and witches would have disdained. But Indigena was perfectly capable of caring—just about plants rather than people, usually—and she was also capable of interchange.

When she opened her eyes, that tiny, flat expanse of wood had blossomed into a white flower. Give her little one time to grow, and it should be able to produce any flower, or any potion ingredient, that she asked it to and could clearly envision.

Carefully, Indigena plucked the flower, and held it up before her eyes. It was white, and drooped as though the weight of its own head was too much for it. It was a narcissus, supposedly born from a beautiful, shallow boy who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and always bent down to see it.

But this narcissus was named for a woman who had not done that, who had sacrificed her life for her husband and son, and who had had no Mark to turn like a traitor from. She had been free to follow her own heart. And she had still done the honorable thing.

Indigena could not help but honor that in turn, enemy or not.

She held the narcissus to her mouth and blew on the stem. She longed to speak the words in her mouth aloud, but if her Lord should hear them, he would never understand.

May this flower ease the grief of her passing, if such can be done. May it help her loved ones to remember that she died with honor, a chosen death, and that even the Dark can recognize such grace.

She held her hand flat again, and a wind not of her own making caught up the narcissus, whirling it around to show it to the world and demand that they admire its beauty, and then bore it away across the fields. Indigena watched it go, before she bowed her head and stood again. Her Mark was burning.

She was needed below.

The narcissus danced in the wind a moment longer, but vanished from sight before she did.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Four: Until the World is Changed

Snape knocked firmly on the door of Harry and Draco's bedroom. He understood the need for Harry to retreat with his partner, but they had been there for most of a day, with Harry appearing only briefly to fetch a few pillows from the Slytherin common room. Snape's other students had told him they thought Harry was Transfiguring the pillows into food.

"Harry?" he called, when only silence answered his knock. "Harry, open this door."

He did, but Snape almost wished he hadn't, once he saw him. The look in his eyes was deep, fierce, and quiet. He stood between Snape and a sight of the bed as if he intended to kill anyone who so much as crossed the threshold.

Snape let out a sigh. He was not—good—with grief. He could try to comfort his son, but almost surely, the words he offered would not be enough, and not what Harry needed to hear, and certainly not ones that would make him abandon the vigil he'd taken up over Draco.

"Lucius would like to see his son," he tried.

The sides of the doorway turned to ice.

Snape shook his head. *Draco must want to stay here. If he wished to leave, I can't believe Harry would be keeping him a prisoner. Perhaps using Lucius's name is not the best tactic, however.*

"He intends to invoke full Malfoy funeral rites," he told Harry, while trying to get a glimpse of his right arm. The potion he'd invented should make curing that arm possible, in a way that simple use of a bezoar would not have. But since Harry had it wrapped in blankets, Snape was not sure what the damage looked like now. "For that, he needs Draco's presence."

Harry went on staring at him, not blinking once.

And then Draco's voice, hoarse and filled with a sound of tears, called, "Let him in, Harry. If it concerns Narcissa, then I want to hear about it."

Harry at once stepped out of the way, arms folded. Snape didn't miss the wince he gave when his right limb crossed the left, and took the opportunity to ask, "How is the pain from your wound?"

"Tolerable." Harry's tone said he wasn't welcome to ask more. He watched Snape as if Snape were an intruder, someone who

would hurt Draco—or, perhaps more accurately, someone who *might* hurt Draco. It was the same expression he had worn around his brother when Lily and James paid the overdue toll of their lives. Draco was his whole world right now, and a threat would produce swift and immediate violence in retaliation, Snape could well believe.

“Will you let me look at it? After?”

“After the funeral? Yes. If Draco does not need my attention as much as he does now.”

Snape was about to say that he’d meant after he was done speaking with Draco, but the boy pushed his head through the curtains of the bed just then, and Snape blinked and shut his mouth. Pain was still written in every corner of his face, and shimmered as tears in his eyes, but he *did* look better. Wrapped in a cocoon of privacy and Harry’s attention, it seemed he’d had the chance to do some healing.

“Full Malfoy funeral rites?” Draco whispered. “Are you *sure* that’s what he said, Professor Snape? Those words and no others?”

“Exactly those,” said Snape, a bit startled. He hadn’t thought that Lucius would do anything less for Narcissa, but it seemed that there was a significance to those words that he hadn’t noticed, or known about. Draco looked to be deep in thought, at least, biting his lip and running one hand up and down his arm as though he were caressing a non-existent Dark Mark.

“Draco?”

Snape had to close his eyes, Harry’s voice was that full of concern and tenderness. That was the way he wished he could speak to his son, and which he knew he would never be able to.

“I want to see him,” said Draco abruptly, standing. “I don’t know how—but yes, I suppose that’s possible, if he chooses that combination of time and mourners. I just never knew—” He was silent again. Then he said, in the wondering tone of someone discovering something wonderful and long forgotten, “He must have really loved her.”

“He did, Draco,” Harry said, moving behind him and draping his arms over his shoulders. His eyes were fierce behind the tenderness, Snape thought, the eyes of a mother gryphon stooping over her chick. “He loves her even now. You want to see him?”

Draco nodded.

“*Point Me* Lucius Malfoy,” Harry whispered, and the ring on his hand vibrated and tugged him in the desired direction.

Snape stood aside, because there seemed to be nothing else to do, and watched them go. Harry leaned confidently close to Draco, at once guiding him and listening for more instructions. He seemed to be the taller, though really, Snape knew, they were of a height. Draco asked a question, and Harry responded at once, voice so low and soothing that Snape felt a shudder run down his spine.

It made a lovely picture, or at least it would have, if Harry’s right arm were not still black and packed with corrupt flesh.

If he would only let me look at it.

“Harry?”

“What?”

Draco loved that. He only had to ask a question, and it was answered at once, Harry *hearing* him at once, because he was never more than a few inches from Draco at any point during this awful day.

“Do you think that full Malfoy funeral rites are the proper way to honor my mother?” They were outside the room where Harry’s spell had said Lucius was now, and Draco wanted to delay just a moment before going inside. If nothing else, he would have to tell Harry to drop the arm wrapped warmly around his shoulders, because that would make him look weak in front of his father, and he didn’t want to, not yet. He buried his head against Harry’s shoulder.

“I don’t know, Draco.” Harry’s voice practically crooned, and he was running a hand through Draco’s hair, the way he knew Draco looked. “I don’t know what the full rites entail.”

“Oh.” Sometimes Draco thought he had explained everything about his family to Harry, and that made it all the more surprising when they bumped up against a barrier of ignorance. “It involves burying her like someone born into the Malfoy family, instead of someone who married into it. Usually, the only people who get that treatment are heirs, or else, back when the family was bigger, cousins who were also spouses.”

“I see.” And Harry’s voice was just as deep and just as serene as if he really had known about this all along, instead of only now learning it. Draco could love him for that, too, he thought, sleepily. Harry’s presence over the last day had made his grief so much easier to bear. “Then, yes, Draco, I think it’s appropriate. She made a sacrifice that any Malfoy should be proud to make, a sacrifice for the love of family and honor and her own principles. She died as she had lived. I think she’s worthy to be laid with anyone you choose to lay her with, Malfoy or Black or any other pureblood family. None of them could be grander than she was.”

“Thank you,” Draco whispered, and nuzzled his cheek against Harry’s hand. “Stand a little apart from me. I don’t think my father should see that I’m as affected by this as I am.”

Harry at once dropped his arm and stepped away. Draco shivered, then convinced himself he couldn’t feel cold, since Harry hadn’t been touching his whole body, just his upper body. Then he took a deep breath, and nerved himself, and knocked on the door.

“Enter,” said Lucius’s cold voice, and so they entered.

Lucius had learned the depth of his wrongness about many things: how much he hated, how much he loved, and how much he had loved his wife. But he had one more doubt left to unlearn, and he never knew it until he saw his son and his son-in-law enter the room the Headmistress had turned over to him and stand before him.

Draco walked unsteadily, but he was still walking. His cheeks had two spots of color on them that told Lucius how hard this was for him, still. His eyes had the unmistakable marks of weeping. Of course, Lucius could hardly hold him in contempt for that, when he was the one who had told his son to weep.

Harry’s magic was everywhere around him, like a wheeling flock of cold birds. His gaze met Lucius’s and locked, taking in, Lucius guessed, every possible way that he could be a threat to Draco. And the answering threat in those green eyes was very real. Make a move that could be interpreted as hurting his son, say the wrong thing, and Harry would tear him apart with no remorse.

And Lucius blinked a little, as one last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

He had thought his son too submissive at one point, and despised him for it. He had thought he should have a dynamic with Harry—if he *must* choose a halfblood as a partner—more like the dynamic Lucius had with Narcissa, committed to hurting each other if necessary in order to prove a point. Harry carried too much of the strength in that partnership.

And now he saw that it did not matter who had the greater strength, if the other person had the power of command. Draco did. He could ask anything of Harry, and it would be done. That might not be true *all* the time, but it was true now, and whenever else Draco truly needed it to be. Harry was not a dominating Lord taking the lead because of his magical power, but a guardian close and loyal to his lover, ready to defend or destroy or tear apart because someone else asked him to.

They are no more submissive to each other, Lucius realized at that moment, than Lady Stormborn and her Venture were. Lady Stormborn had been a Light Lady who could not use her magic for killing. Venture, her lover and strong right hand, had done it for her instead, and she had been so effective that it was said more people feared her than Lady Stormborn, though the Lady was the stronger.

Such strength runs behind and before the Malfoy family, and will serve to shelter my son when I am gone.

“Father?” Draco’s voice was anxious, and Lucius realized he had been silent too long. Draco leaned forward, staring at him. Harry bristled intangibly, magic sliding out like hedgehog quills. “Is there something wrong? Did you not intend to invoke the full funeral rites for Mother after all?”

Harry’s magic grew worse, and colder. Lucius heard the distinctive howl of a winter storm.

“No,” he said quietly. “She deserves them, son, and she shall have them. I was—lost in thought. Now, come, sit with me, and make sure we have the list of guests we shall need to invite correct.”

Draco came and sat with him. After a moment, he glanced up and asked Harry to come stand at his right shoulder. Harry did, leaning his left arm on Draco's shoulder at his next direction. His right arm was still shrouded in blankets, and Lucius could not see what it looked like. From the gaze that Harry trained on him, vigilant as a hawk's, he hardly cared, next to what he thought Lucius might do to Draco.

I need not worry for my son when I am gone. He will be sheltered, protected, and loved as every Malfoy deserves to be. And that he could win such love for himself speaks of hidden depths in him I have never known.

“Father?”

Lucius shook his head, and told himself to stop drifting off into dreams of a future that might never be, if not all of them survived this war. He knew Harry still had reason to hate him, and in this mood, he might well strike first and think later if Draco was unduly distressed. He reached out, grasped the list of people who would attend the funeral, and slid it in front of Draco. “Here is the initial list of guests. Can you think of anyone who is missing?”

He soaked up Harry's power through his other senses, feeling the press of pain around his skull like a crown, since he didn't quite dare to look at the silent Lord-level wizard again.

Get past this war, and the Malfoy family has a fine future waiting for it. We shall indeed rise again.

Narcissa's funeral began on a day like the sea, when the sky was so thick with clouds that it seemed impossible light could find its way through, and yet it did. Harry watched the light dripping through the holes in the clouds, staining their undersides the way that sunlight would stain the surface of the rolling water, and felt a slow, deep sense of satisfaction. This was the way that it should be, neither entirely Light nor entirely Dark, the way that Narcissa had been. Oh, she had been a Dark witch, but she had died out of love and selflessness and honor and all those other conceptions that so many Light wizards believed Dark wizards could not understand.

He lowered his chin to Draco's shoulder and squeezed his arms firmly around him. He let out a little gasp when the material of Draco's robes shifted past his right arm, and tried to conceal his wince. Every movement against the black skin hurt as if someone were roasting him with dragonfire. But he was determined not to show that. This was a day for Draco's grief, as the past few days had been, and intruding on it seemed little short of obscene to Harry.

Draco faced him with a small frown, though, obviously having noted the gasp. “Are you all right?”

Harry fixed his eyes on Draco's face. His gray eyes were unclouded, as they had been since he heard about this funeral, wearing an expression of grim pride. His blond hair had been combed within an inch of its life, until one more tug of the comb would have brought strands out; it didn't shift as the wind swirled past them. His robes were dark, but trimmed with both blue-gray, the color of the old Malfoy family crest, and silver, one of the colors of the Blacks. Harry thought he looked magnificent, and let his admiration shine through his eyes. Draco flushed a bit and looked away.

“Perfectly all right,” Harry whispered. “I'm here with you. Where else would I wish to be?”

Draco's hand found and squeezed his, hard. Harry was glad that it was the left one. The right one was still a crabbed claw after the hard clutch he'd maintained on the Peverell ring. But he got by. At least he had his magic. Most other people damaged after a battle like the one that had destroyed the Horcrux and the shard of Tom Riddle weren't as lucky.

“Thanks, Harry,” Draco said softly, and then lifted his head as the distant sound of a bell rang out across the field. “That's it,” he whispered. “That's where we're supposed to go. Follow.” He took a step forward.

Harry followed closely, at his left shoulder. The space at Draco's right shoulder had to be left open for any Malfoy ghosts who wanted to walk with him. It felt unnatural to be on the other side—Harry didn't think he could shield Draco as well against attacks from here—but it was a requirement of the rites, and Draco had wanted these rites with all his heart. Harry could certainly put his own discomfort aside. Anything that Draco needed from him, he would have.

They were on the ground in front of Malfoy Manor, which shimmered now with fully restored blood wards, since no one was about to use it as a safehouse again. The ground looked flat and as gray as the sky, though crossed, like it, with lines of glimmering sunlight. Harry remembered the first time he had ever seen the Manor from this angle, the Christmas holiday that he had come from Hogwarts with Draco, and remembered the way that Narcissa had promised him safe sanctuary in the house. She had kept that promise, though Lucius had not.

Harry shook the thoughts from his head. He did not want to remember bad things about the past. He wanted to remember the woman they had come to honor, and the husband who had loved her enough to organize this for her.

He and Draco went in silent procession along the front of the house. When they reached the far corner, Snape joined them. He held a narcissus in his hand, and wore fine robes that Harry hadn't known he owned; he thought that they might have been a gift from Lucius. For whatever reason, along with Narcissa's blood relatives and the man—Harry—who had been adopted into the family, there could be one invited guest at this funeral, and Lucius had invited Snape. Harry thought it might have been because he had been there to see her die.

Draco bowed deeply on sighting Snape, and took out a narcissus of his own from his sleeve. "Well met, fellow traveler on the roads of death," he said. "Who have you come to honor?"

"A fallen woman," said Snape, his pure, polished tones perfectly fitted, Harry thought, to the role he was meant to play, as companion to Narcissa's soul. "A fallen Malfoy wife and mother. When I heard she was dead, I did not wait, but hastened here to see her go."

Draco considered Snape in silence for some moments. Harry almost wondered if he should prompt him to remember the ritual words, then scolded himself. Of course Draco would remember them, but it was a disgrace to Narcissa's spirit if he didn't take the proper amount of time to judge the guest.

"Be here, and be welcome," said Draco abruptly. "It is Narcissa Malfoy who has died, and it is fitting that you should come when you heard the news. A mighty wizard such as yourself is always welcome." Harry breathed a bit more easily. Magical power was about the most neutral thing Draco could have judged Snape on, and so he was glad that Draco had chosen it. "What gift do you bring her?"

Snape reached up and removed a slender silver chain from around his neck, offering a vial of crystalline glass. This, Harry was less certain Lucius had given him; Snape might well have such a thing in his stores for capturing his more expensive Potions ingredients. "A petal from an amaranth," he answered.

Harry started, and looked more closely at the petal in the glass. Yes; it was purple-red, and shone with a faint, flickering flame, rather like the one that might surround a phoenix feather. Where Snape had found a sprig of the immortal flower, and why he had chosen to give up this petal to Narcissa, Harry had no idea. Amaranths were more rarely seen even than phoenixes were.

"Be once, and twice, and thrice welcome, then," said Draco, and reached back to put his hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry felt himself come alive under the touch. "Do you acknowledge your connection to the man who would have been Narcissa Malfoy's son-in-law, had she lived?"

Snape looked directly into Harry's eyes, and sent a bolt of reassuring Legilimency. Harry wished he could scowl. He didn't need reassurance, Draco did.

"I recognize it," Snape said. "It is part of the reason I am here." He looked back at Draco. "But the greater part is that I wished to honor her, brave and gracious woman that she was, a Malfoy wife and mother."

Draco caught his breath, and then nodded. Harry thought he was probably more affected by the ritual words than he'd admit. "You are welcome, Professor Snape," he said. "A mighty wizard, and a gift that speaks of immortality. Be four times welcome." He turned and began to walk the path they'd been instructed to tread again, along the house and towards the Malfoy vaults at the back. Harry followed, still at his left shoulder, and Snape trailed behind them both.

Harry wished the funeral rites hadn't called for Snape to walk there. He had eyes that were far too keen for the role of follower, for one thing, and for another, Harry could feel those eyes boring into his shoulder blades. Snape had an obsession with his health over the past few days.

They met up with Regulus when they were halfway through the immense, circular track that Lucius had described to them, and which they had to walk, to tell all the Malfoy estates that someone beloved was gone from them. He wore dark robes with the Black crest prominent above his heart, and he carried a black rose. Its petals were edged with silver.

"Who comes?" Draco asked, his voice appropriately grave and reverential. "For you are not of Malfoy blood, sir, by your countenance, and it is a Malfoy woman we have come to honor."

Regulus nodded. Harry had not thought he could look so solemn. Of course, the loss of Narcissa had struck him harder than just

the loss of a cousin, Harry thought. They'd spent much time together in the last little while, as Regulus identified Black artifacts that might be of use in the war, and Narcissa helped him remember which were deadly outside of the family and which ones were not. They'd had the time to talk, to exchange memories, and to know each other as adults, outside the childhood Harry thought was half-twisted, given what he knew of the way Sirius and Bellatrix had grown up. Harry decided he would need to attend to Regulus's grief as soon as Draco's need for him lessened. He didn't know if Regulus was talking to anyone about it, even Snape, and everyone should have someone to talk to.

"She was Malfoy, but born of the Black line, and I am the heir of Black." Regulus held up the black rose. "I bring a flower in the colors of her birth, one that is bred of magic and not from nature. She was a creature of magic, as well, and too perfect to simply grow without careful tending and shaping and sculpting, all of which she did herself."

Draco bowed. "Be welcome, heir of Black, for the legacy you bear that resulted in Narcissa Malfoy," he said. "Be twice welcome, for your understanding of her. Be thrice welcome, for your sobriety and quietness in joining us on the roads of death. Will you walk with us?"

"I will."

Regulus turned to accompany them, walking parallel to Draco but a short distance away. The rose in his hands remained steady. Harry studied his face surreptitiously, though, and surprised a trace of tears there.

Yes, I will have to talk to him.

Almost at the end, near the Malfoy crypts, they met Andromeda and Tonks. Tonks's hair was dark, and her eyes gray. Harry thought she might be wearing her true face, or perhaps she had simply moved her features closer to Black for the role that she was supposed to play in the full funeral rites. Andromeda looked much as she had the last time Harry had seen her, when they sent letters to the other Ministries, but more thoughtful. Tonks held a narcissus, Andromeda a flower that Harry didn't recognize.

"These women are also of the Black line," said Regulus, introducing them, as was proper for the representative of an alien bloodline, Harry knew. "They are under my protection. One was a woman who shared her childhood with Narcissa Malfoy, and the other is of her body."

"What gifts do you bring for the deceased?" Draco asked. His voice was breaking now. Harry let his left arm brush undetectably against his side in support, since they couldn't touch openly at this point in the ceremony.

"I bring a narcissus," Tonks answered, her voice hesitant and hoarse, "for her name. I did not know her well enough to do otherwise, and a gift that presumes is a gift with its purpose undone."

Draco nodded, and turned to look at Andromeda.

"I was her sister," said Andromeda, and held out her hand. Harry took the chance to study the flower more closely. It looked like a narcissus, actually, but a dark blue-purple, and its center was a deep blue, the color of Narcissa's eyes. "This is a blossom of the bush that flowered the day she was born, and the day she first learned to walk, and the day she married, and the day she died. No time else. It does not have a name. That knowledge died with my mother."

"Be welcome," Draco whispered, "you who come in humility. Be twice welcome, you who shared your childhood and can tell us things about Narcissa Malfoy we never knew." Harry could see him fighting the urge to reach out and touch the strange flower. "Be thrice welcome, you who saw her born and are here to see her lowered." He nodded. "Walk with us on the roads of death."

Andromeda and Tonks took their places at Regulus's shoulders, and on they went. Harry was still trying to ignore Snape's stare.

At least that became easier when they reached the grave itself. It was not, strictly speaking, a grave, but an open entrance into the white Malfoy mausoleum, which Harry had never seen before; Draco told him it only became visible when one of the family had died. The air hummed with ancient magic. The coffin stood ready in front of the open tomb, with Lucius beside it and the top lifted to show Narcissa's face. *Too peaceful*, Harry thought, as he gazed at her. *There is no thinking that she died as anything but a willing sacrifice.*

He banished the thoughts that tried to follow that. It had been a willing death, indeed, and he could not allow his own grief to intrude, not now. There were better things to do, like moving forward to Draco's side as they all halted, just in case he should fall.

"Who comes?" Lucius asked, drawing his wand, as if he would defend his wife's body. That was more formality than anything, Harry knew, left over from the days when rival pureblood families would sometimes attack during funerals, given that all their

enemies were gathered in one place. “Who comes to disturb the peace of the newly dead, Narcissa Malfoy, a Malfoy wife and mother?”

“We do not disturb it, Father, defender,” said Draco, head bowed. “These are the man who would have been her son-in-law—for a moment, his hand brushed hard against Harry’s ribs, returning the gesture from before “—a guest met on the road who bears a token of immortality, the heir of the line into which she was born, a sister who shared her childhood, and the child of that sister’s body. They bring flowers, as is proper, those symbols of beauty that live and die, and shall live and die until the world is changed and flowers bloom no more. Some honor her name, some her character, some her life. They are not intruders, but proper and respectful mourners of the greatness that is gone.” He paused, then added softly, “We shall not see her like again.”

Lucius nodded sharply, then said, “Lay your flowers down.”

They stepped forward, in reverse order, so that the purple flower Andromeda held was laid first, under Narcissa’s left hand, and the narcissus Harry held came last. He peered down at Narcissa for a moment, wondering about the best place to put it—he could not place it between her breasts; that was for Lucius alone—and at last lifted her hair and settled it under the long golden fall.

Lucius opened his mouth, and then snapped it shut and stared. Harry turned his head.

Another narcissus was whirling up the wind, as though hastened along by someone who was both invisible and late. It tucked itself into the coffin, near the place where the lid would close down and conceal Narcissa’s face. The moment it fell limp, it lost all hint of magic.

Harry looked sideways at Draco and mouthed, *Was that supposed to happen?*

Eyes wide, Draco shook his head.

Lucius recovered quickly, though. “We all have our gifts,” he said. “And even the world mourns her.” Harry saw Draco stand a little straighter at that, and silently blessed whoever had sent the narcissus; it had eased Draco’s grief, a little. “But it is time for my gift, the gift of the one who married her and brought her into the Malfoy family, and sired her son upon her.” His voice softened, and Harry had the feeling the next words were not in the rites. “The man who loved her, though too little and too late.”

He leaned forward and laid a tempered blade between Narcissa’s breasts. Harry did not think he had ever seen a knife so beautiful. Its steel rippled like a wave, and was silver with touches of white, as though someone had captured the glint of diamonds under the surface. The hilt was set with diamonds itself, in the shape of a narcissus.

“She was a tempered blade,” said Lucius, “and our relationship was ever on a knife’s edge. May rust never touch her.”

He stepped back and raised his wand. The coffin’s lid shut slowly.

Draco gave a choked sob at his side. Harry stepped forward and wrapped his left arm around him, turning his head to nuzzle at his neck. He could do that, now that the gravest part of the ceremony was past. Draco turned and clutched at him, eyes tightly shut. Harry couldn’t blame him. One of the most wonderful women he had ever known was going where no one would ever look upon her face again.

Farewell, Narcissa, he thought, tendering his own goodbye when it would not be improper for him to do so. She had cared a great deal about propriety, he knew. *The first true mother I ever knew.*

The coffin shut, and Lucius levitated it into the tomb. The door shut with a shimmer, and a moment later, the whole mausoleum vanished, sealing itself beyond sight until it should be needed again.

Lucius tilted back his head, and screamed.

Harry shivered. He had known this was coming, of course—the Wailing was part of many Dark pureblood funerals, not only the Malfoys’—but it was still a shock to hear it. Lucius gave vent to the tearing pain in his heart, and, appropriately, the sound tore the air, and made the birds wheeling overhead flee.

Lucius cried again. This time, Draco joined his voice to his father’s, and Harry heard the tears he had, even now, kept back. He shook his head and tightened his hold. How did one rise, knowing a loving parent had been there every day, and get used to living without them?

A third time Lucius wailed, and a second time Draco wailed, and now it was permitted for the rest of them to become the chorus.

Harry took a deep breath, then loosed it in a ringing scream.

He listened as the sounds rode the wind, and hoped that anyone who might think of harming Draco would hear his cry for the warning it was, and stay away.

And he hoped, too, if she still had ears to hear, that Narcissa would listen, and know that the son she had died for was well taken care of.

Harry closed his eyes, and drew Draco close, and set himself to endure.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Five: Changeable

Harry leaned forward, staring steadily at Regulus. “I know that you miss her,” he said, which made Regulus freeze over the tea he was preparing. He had his back turned to Harry, the position he’d been in since almost the moment Harry came through the Floo connection to Silver-Mirror. “You don’t have to pretend around me, Regulus. You became close in these last few months. She was your cousin, and your memories of that are much nearer the surface than hers because you didn’t physically age. You can tell me that you grieve for Narcissa.”

Regulus turned around with two cups of tea in his hands and an expression of unnatural calm on his face. “Of course I do.”

Harry Summoned one of the cups of tea, gently enough not to spill a drop, and narrowed his eyes as he set it down on the arm of his chair. “Then why are you acting as if you don’t? I don’t think anyone expects this kind of stoic act outside the funeral.”

“I did not wish to burden you further,” said Regulus quietly, and sipped at his tea. Harry could see the signs of a coming rupture in the sides of his face, but he was willing to wait for it to arrive. “You had enough to do with destroying the Horcrux and taking care of Draco.”

“I still noticed,” Harry whispered. “I would have come to you the moment the funeral was over, if Draco hadn’t needed a little more reassurance. But this time, even though he wanted me to stay there a bit longer, I refused. I can tell when he truly needs me there, the way he did the past few days, and when he only wants to stay in bed to skive off.”

Regulus almost smiled. Then he blinked and said, “Doesn’t this mean that you’re missing classes, Harry?”

“You’re more important.”

Regulus took a deep breath and licked his lips. Harry waited. Regulus had been more often cast in the role of comforter than comforted these past few months, unless one counted his nightmares of Death’s country. And Harry was not only younger than he was, but someone Regulus thought of as his child, his heir, in need of protection. Of course it would feel odd to confess this.

“She was the one who taught me what it was like,” Regulus began softly, “to have a child in danger, in the midst of battle, and still fight on. She didn’t let her concern for Draco dominate her entire life, though of course it was always there. She concentrated on the Black artifacts, on her missing husband, on the news of the battles and your international connections flowing in. I do get obsessed with one concern if I don’t watch myself. She taught me how to act on more than one level.”

“Good,” Harry whispered.

Regulus shot him a small smile. “It didn’t help that I’d known her as a little hellion, you know—by the standards of the Black family—the most outgoing of her sisters, and now she was this poised and perfect woman.” He shook his head in wonder. “Marriage to Lucius Malfoy was good for her, and I wouldn’t have said that it would be when they got married.”

“Why not?” Harry asked. From what Narcissa herself had told him about their courtship, she had always known that she wanted to marry Lucius, and everything after their seventh year at Hogwarts had been a mere settling of formalities.

“Lucius Malfoy was colder at a deeper level than she was,” Regulus answered. “They complemented each other, of course, but there’s a difference between that and one partner preying on the other. I could see perfectly how she would melt a bit of Lucius’s coldness, how he would get what he needed from her. I couldn’t see how she would get what she needed from him. She already had strength of her own, and when she needed human warmth, he’d have none.”

“I think it was more than that.” Harry poked cautiously at his thoughts of Narcissa. They felt like a loose tooth, even now. “She

got something else that she needed from him, something more important than warmth.”

“And that probably proves only that I don’t understand them, and never did.” Regulus gave a wry smile and shrugged. “And the woman I grieve for is more the woman of these last few months *and* the cousin I knew as a child, not all the women she was in between.”

“She’d understand that,” said Harry. “You weren’t there, and it wasn’t your fault. Everyone believed you were dead.” The spell Dumbledore had used to make it seem as if Sirius were the heir of Black and to make everyone forget Regulus’s existence still angered him if he thought of it. “Why do you think you should grieve for everything she was?”

Regulus bit his lip, making him look very young. “Because she was such a wonderful woman,” he said finally. “It seems a blasphemy not to mourn her as fully as she should be mourned.”

“She’ll receive that,” said Harry. “From Lucius. From Draco. But mourn what she was to you, Regulus. I’m fairly sure she never was that to anyone else. Dark pureblood witches don’t tend to take parenting advice from each other.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Regulus dryly. “Narcissa’s mother never could tell my mother how to raise me and Sirius, though she tried—and Sirius, at least, would have been better off if our mother had listened.” He hesitated again. Then he said, “Would you be adverse to spending next weekend in my company, Harry? There are a few secrets of the Black estate that you don’t know even now, and that you should.”

Harry smiled. “I’d like to.” That way, he would get to see more of Regulus, and make sure he was dealing well with his grief. Though it seemed quiet and peaceful right now, with no noisy storms of tears, he might be persuaded to shed them as more time passed since the funeral.

They talked of other things, then, with Regulus determinedly changing the subject, and Harry letting him. He’d opened a road. Regulus wouldn’t enclose himself behind walls of bone or ice and pretend nothing was wrong. Harry knew how disastrous that would be.

They talked about the other Horcruxes, methods of destroying them once they had them and once, in a fit of Regulus’s drollery, on ways to lure Evan Rosier close. Harry only smiled through that part. The Hufflepuff cup would be the last Horcrux he tried to obtain, he thought. Though Rosier’s magic might be less formidable than the defenses that had guarded the ring, he moved around, and there was next to no way of being sure where he would go next.

At last, Regulus sighed and said, “As much as I’ve enjoyed your company, Harry, Severus will be wondering where you went.”

“I suppose so,” Harry said. He’d missed Potions. He stood, making sure to keep his gaze on Regulus, and keep it calm and assessing. “I will see you next weekend? No sudden excuses otherwise?”

“Not unless I wake up with a sore throat and a cold you shouldn’t be within a hundred miles of.”

Harry smiled, and then ducked back through the Floo connection into the hospital wing. Draco was waiting for him, and Harry lifted his head anxiously, his instincts from the past few days stirring. Had something happened while he was gone? Did Draco’s waiting for him mean he should have returned earlier?

“Harry!” Draco reached out and, probably only because it was closer to him than the other, he caught Harry’s right arm.

The pain was instant, like a hot drill, and Harry fainted.

Draco stared, and then knelt swiftly beside Harry. He’d only meant to tell him how spectacular a bad mood Snape had been in that morning when he realized Harry wasn’t in Potions, even though Draco was. He hadn’t thought his mere touch could make him fall.

Then he caught a glimpse of blackness above the bandages that shrouded Harry’s right arm, and froze.

I didn’t—he never showed me his arm in the past few days. I just assumed the damage had been cured. Draco squinted, finding the blackness hard to look at even now. And he was using Notice-Me-Not charms to make sure that I didn’t look too closely. Damn him!

He quickly undid the bandages, and hissed. Harry's arm was shedding black, crispy flakes like toast cooked too well. The flesh underneath felt spongy to Draco's touch, and his hand was a black-red crab's claw.

And then Harry was awake and gasping from the pain of being touched, and Draco put accusations and blame aside. He would yell later. Right now, what mattered was healing Harry's arm, as much as that could be done.

"Come on," he said quietly, and pulled on Harry's left arm until he sat up. "Do you want to go to Madam Pomfrey for this, or to Professor Snape?"

Harry froze for a moment, then seemed to realize he wouldn't get out of it. He shook his head slightly. "I've talked to Madam Pomfrey before," he said. "She'd confine me to bed, but not do anything else. It would be too much fussing. Take me to Snape." He hissed under his breath as he stood. Draco glanced over to make sure that his robe wasn't brushing against Harry's right arm, and frowned when he saw that it wasn't.

"Does your arm hurt all the time?" he asked.

"When air brushes against it." Harry shrugged, and stared at the bandages Draco had dropped to the ground. They reassembled themselves around his right arm. This time, Draco could see that there was a narrow layer of air in between the cloth and the skin. "But that hurts less than something else touching it."

Draco narrowed his eyes. Certainty had just settled like a stone in his stomach. "The *only* reason you're wearing those bandages is to keep people from staring," he said. "They don't actually do anything to help you."

Harry returned the frown. "Of course they do. I told you, air is less painful, and this means that, most of the time, nothing but air touches it."

"You didn't tell me about this. Why?" Draco longed to touch Harry's shoulder in reassurance, but he didn't fancy being the one to send Harry crumbling to the floor. He steered him out of the hospital wing and towards the dungeons instead. Harry followed with only a small amount of stiffness in his spine. Draco's puzzlement increased. He could tell that Harry didn't want to see Snape, but not why.

"Are you mad, Draco?"

"Mad on account of what? What did I do?" This was one of the few times in their relationship Draco had ever found Harry utterly bewildering.

"I didn't tell you about it," said Harry, as if speaking to a very small child, "because I *knew* that you were suffering a wound I can't even imagine. You love so few people, Draco, and one of them is gone." He turned to the side, and Draco suddenly found himself the one who was the recipient of the concerned gaze. Harry shrugged his left arm free, and ran his hand gently up and down Draco's cheek. "Are you ready to do this? I can take myself to Snape, you know."

There were two moments during which Draco just blinked, in the middle of a pure white haze of confusion.

Then the confusion became rage, and he would have punched Harry if not for that fragile right arm. As it was, he stepped behind Harry and propelled him down the corridor. Harry cocked his head to stare back at him.

"You idiot," Draco hissed. "Did you really think I'd be invalid from my mother's death for months? Did you think I had to stop caring about you because *I* was hurting? Didn't it occur to you that this might give me something to do *besides* brood?"

"I wouldn't have *minded* if you were an invalid for months, because of what you've suffered," Harry corrected. He was shaking his head now, and trying to halt, but Draco kept his feet moving, so that he couldn't do something stupid like stop and argue. "If you recovered before then, that would be wonderful. But you should have what you need, Draco, and—"

"And part of that involves you whole and healthy." Harry tried to catch a corner in the hallway to stop them. Draco expertly steered him past that and down the stairs beyond. "I'm not the only one who suffered, Harry. I'm not the only one who lost. Am I going to care about some random person I never knew who dies in a werewolf attack or a Death Eater raid? No. But I *do* care about you, and just because my mother is dead doesn't mean that I've lost all ability to love or look beyond myself. That you would think I had is insulting."

Abruptly, Harry bowed his head and stepped to the side in a neat dancer's movement, leaving Draco to push empty air. His eyes were narrow, but it was the quietude of his face that made Draco break off, not his gaze. This was Harry in the midst of a

dangerous rage.

“*That’s* why I haven’t been talking to you or Snape,” Harry snapped. “*That’s* why I thought that you shouldn’t know what I was thinking about, even before your grief made it dangerous for you—“

“Dangerous my pureblood arse—“

“*It is!*” Harry shouted. “It was a devastating loss, and the attention I gave you was no less than what you needed or deserved, Draco.” He was breathing hard, and Draco thought he saw the sheen of tears on his cheeks, but in a moment they were gone, dried by his magic—or perhaps not having existed at all. “But that’s not what we were arguing about. We were arguing about what I think about you. No, I never thought you were selfish. No, I never thought that you’d lost all ability to love because one person whom you did love is dead. *Stop putting words in my mouth that were never there.* I haven’t told you or Snape anything I’ve been thinking or feeling because I don’t trust you not to scold me for it!”

The words made the corridor ring. Draco blinked, and then stepped forward with his hand outstretched. Harry was bristling, intangible icicles extending from him. Draco knew he wouldn’t be hurt, though. He never was. Harry never hurt him magically.

“Harry,” he breathed. “It’s all right. I promise, both of us only want to help you. If you tell us not to scold, we won’t.”

Harry gave him a smile so bitter it stopped Draco in his tracks. “That’s the problem, Draco,” he answered. “I don’t trust you not to do it. It’ll start innocently, under the pretense of comfort, such as telling me that I really shouldn’t regret my parents’ deaths, they were quicker than they deserved and at least it wasn’t someone closer to me. And that will lead to an argument. And the one thing I *cannot* afford right now is an argument with you, or Snape, or Connor, about my emotions. I think I could bear everything else. But not that. It’s too exhausting.”

Well, yes, that does hurt, that he doesn’t trust us. Draco sidled another step closer. Harry took a step back. Already, Draco could see, he was trying to smooth it over, trying to pretend this hadn’t happened, and swallow back the anger, grief, and other emotions he was experiencing.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said at last, opening his eyes. They were unnaturally bright, Draco thought in alarm. “That shouldn’t have happened, not when you’re grieving and not when we have more important things to worry about. I’ll still see Snape about my arm. I agree, it’s time. The pain isn’t getting better, though the blackness hasn’t advanced.”

“Harry,” Draco whispered, unable to believe, now, that he hadn’t thought of this earlier. “You loved my mother, too.”

“We aren’t talking about that,” Harry snapped, and then turned and walked towards the dungeons again.

“You did love her,” Draco said, following him. “I know it. Please. I can’t imagine that you’re feeling anything about her that I would *want* to scold you for. Or Snape either, for that matter. Please talk to me about it?”

“I can imagine it,” Harry muttered darkly, and then fixed him with a calm stare. “Look—Draco, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I love you more than I can express in words, or with magic, or with actions. Everything together would still fall short. Whatever you need of me, you can have. But this you don’t need, and you can’t have. Leave it alone.”

Draco fell silent, biting his lip. No matter what he thought or felt, he was enough of an expert in Harry-speak to know that he wouldn’t get what he wanted by pushing, not right now.

Maybe Snape can make an impression on him. I hope so.

Harry spent the walk to the dungeons reinforcing his barriers. Snape would no doubt react to the sight of his arm much as Draco had, and he wanted to be prepared for that. This breakdown should never have happened. It was much easier if Draco and Snape—and Connor, for that matter, though he’d kept a respectful distance since Narcissa’s death—never suspected he was hiding anything. Then he wouldn’t get the admonishments for not talking to someone.

An enormous weariness rose up in Harry at the thought of those admonishments. What had happened the moment Draco found out about his arm? Yes. Of course. Scolding. It seemed that nothing Harry did was right. Keep it secret and keep it silent, and that was wrong. Share it, and that was wrong.

He knew what they would say about his parents, about the darkness he carried inside him, about his feelings for Narcissa’s death.

They deserved it, Harry. How can you grieve for them?

You're not really that dark, Harry. You would never do anything like Voldemort did.

She died as a sacrifice, Harry. She wanted to die.

All of them were well-meant. All of them were designed to scold him out of how he felt and into a more acceptable frame of mind. All of them were wrong.

If I reacted that badly to Draco's reaction to my arm, Merlin knows what would happen if I said anything to Snape about the fact that part of me likes hurting people, likes taking revenge on my enemies. He wouldn't just listen. He's incapable of that. He'd try to convince me that part of me doesn't exist, when I know it does, or that it's all right, when I know it isn't because it violates my own principles.

There was no perfect solution to the problem. What there was, was the partial solution Harry had constructed. They didn't ask, because they had no idea what was missing, and he held the feelings to himself and brooded in private and worked through them on his own.

Besides, it wasn't as though they didn't have enough matters of their own to concern them in the real world. Draco had just lost his mother. Snape had classes to teach, and his friendship with Regulus was growing again. Connor was currently involved in helping Parvati fight several obscure legal maneuvers her parents were trying to get her back. All of them had their own lives. None of them needed access to his inner emotions to be complete.

I can just keep those emotions silent. They can be mine. It's a thousand times better than being scolded.

Snape simply stared at the blackened arm for a long moment. Then he reached out and ran one finger down it. Harry closed his eyes and shook at the pain.

"Idiot boy," Snape whispered.

Too late, he saw Draco's furiously shaking head, and caught a glimpse of dark satisfaction in Harry's eyes when he opened them. It wasn't that he was pleased with the state of his arm, Snape thought, staring at him and using Legilimency to capture what he could of Harry's surface thoughts. It was more the cynical pleasure Snape himself sometimes felt when people did things his belief in their stupidity had predicted they would do.

Snape did not enjoy being evaluated as stupid.

Before he could object, Harry said, "Yes, I'm an idiot, I should have come to you long since, et cetera. All the things that are a regular part of the way you relate to me. I could recite them all back to you by heart. Can we get on with healing my arm now?" His eyes were half-lidded, and a dangerous fire shimmered behind them that Snape didn't recognize.

On the other hand, Harry's words did let him understand what was wrong.

What I have done in the past is no longer effective. Perhaps it never was. I cannot scold Harry into taking care of himself, and threats only work when Harry feels guilt. And Merlin knows I do not wish to encourage that guilt. He needs something else from me now.

What is it?

For now, since he didn't know, Snape would settle for neutrality and see where that brought them. "The poison's advance has stopped," he said. "What needs to happen is the purging of the corrupt flesh, so that new, healthy muscle and skin can grow underneath it." Harry nodded. Snape looked him in the eye. "There is a potion that will make the arm slough such skin. It was designed for use with burn victims, to try and heal their wounds. Of course, it was not completely effective; it draws on the magic of the victim, and tends to change very weak wizards and witches into Squibs."

Harry snorted. "That will not be a problem, at least."

Draco opened his mouth as if to say something, then snapped it shut. Snape approved. Since Draco seemed to be caught in the

same dilemma he was—what to say to Harry that he wouldn't take the wrong way—it was probably best if he remained silent for now. "It is also exquisitely painful."

Harry looked him directly in the face. "That will not be a problem, either."

"It may be," said Snape quietly. "I know you can bear pain, Harry, but not on this level. You will be confined to bed for a few days, and it is necessary to keep you unconscious as much as possible during this time, so that the pain does not overwhelm your reason."

Harry's nostrils flared, and his teeth clenched. Then he nodded, once. "If that's what must be done, that's what must be done," he said.

Snape hated the resignation in his tone, and the indifference that backed it, as if the only reason Harry was doing this was that he was made to. He still, at bottom, didn't care about himself as Snape wished he would.

For the first time, however, Snape was coming to accept that Harry could not be talked into that caring. He needed something else.

What?

"If you go to Madam Pomfrey, Harry, and tell her the situation, I will brew the potion and bring it up," Snape said calmly. "It does not take long to make. Tell her to give you Dreamless Sleep in the meanwhile, so that you are unconscious by the time I finish brewing."

Draco moved as if he would accompany Harry, but Harry shot him a cool glance, said, "I think I can find my own way to the hospital wing, thanks," and left.

Snape turned at once to Draco when the door had shut. That earlier and sudden silencing had left him sure that Draco knew more than he let on. "What is the matter with him?" he demanded.

"He said he couldn't take being chided." Draco's brow was furrowed as he stared at the door, and for the first time in a week, Snape saw something in his face other than grief for his mother. "He doesn't want to tell us anything about what he feels—and that includes pain, I suppose—for fear that we'll misunderstand it. He said he couldn't take the arguments." He looked up at Snape. "And I think he's right. You saw the way he was just now, unable to hide his emotions. Until I actually confronted him, and scolded him, he was pulling that same 'I'm-perfectly-fine-and-focused-on-others' act that he kept up without a break this past week. He doesn't want to think about what he's feeling, and he doesn't want to talk about it."

"And do you know what the sources of those emotions are?" Snape asked softly, though he could think of at least two: the deaths of Lily and James, and the death of Narcissa.

"There are at least three, I think," said Draco. "My mother, his parents, and the darkness in him I saw the night Medusa and Eos Rosier-Henlin died. Actually, that's probably a fourth source of trauma right there, since he saw it happen, and he won't talk about it." Draco took a deep breath and leaned his forehead on his hand. Snape could hear him fighting to get the words out—less, he thought, because Draco had true difficulty in saying them than because he was attempting to phrase the concept for the first time. "He thinks we won't spend time comforting him. Instead, what we really care about—according to him—is persuading him to see things our way. He believes that's more important to us than what he's really thinking and feeling. And, sir?" He looked up, biting his lip. "I think he's right. At least sometimes."

Snape opened his mouth to refute that. He had indeed comforted Harry without words and without demands, such as after he lost Fawkes—

And he had tried to persuade him that what he felt was wrong, as well, such as when he brought the Potters to trial.

He shut his mouth, then exhaled slowly.

"I suspect, Mr. Malfoy," he murmured, "that we have not been thinking of him as a fully healed person even now. I, at least, have been content to trace most of his reactions back to abuse, or to his sacrificial instincts, or to his damnable need to spare other people the *burden* of his feelings. I thought he had been hiding behind you for the past week, using your grief as an excuse not to deal with his own. But perhaps we should trust what he says, instead of looking for hidden motives behind it. He simply does not want to be treated like a child who needs to learn a lesson. I think we can accommodate that."

Draco's face shone like the moon. "I can do that, sir." Then he paused, and his expression dimmed a bit. "But how are we going to persuade him to trust us again? That's really the root of it, really, that he doesn't trust us."

"We are going to have to take risks." Snape could feel his mouth curling at the thought, but if there was any person he should be willing to take risks for, it was Harry. "Approach him and offer to listen while knowing he may snap at us. There's no guaranteed way of dealing with Harry. We may have become too used to assuming that there is, that we understand his every reaction because we know his past. But that is no longer true. I do not think it ever completely was."

Draco nodded, his expression on fire with determination. "I'll go to the hospital wing and sit with him, sir." He paused when he reached the door. "Will it really take you only a few minutes to brew the Purging Potion?"

"It will," said Snape. "It is a simple draught, indeed; only its inconveniences keep it from being used more often."

Draco nodded again, and left. Snape turned to gather the ingredients he would need, while trying to recover from the feeling that a good deal of ground had slipped from under his feet.

So one of the tasks I had assumed would be implacable—being Harry's guardian—ends up being more changeable than I imagined.

Well.

I am not one to give up.

To Draco's relief, he reached the hospital wing before the Dreamless Sleep Potion lulled Harry into slumber. Harry was curled up in a bed, eyes drooping, right arm splayed awkwardly over his chest.

He saw Draco coming, and drew himself up. Draco winced at the sight of several emotions vanishing behind that emotionless mask.

"How are you feeling, Draco?" Harry asked quietly.

"Better," said Draco, sitting in the chair beside him and taking Harry's left hand. "What about you?"

Harry just watched him. "Fine," he said, after a moment, and now that he was listening, Draco could hear the spark of challenge in it, the assumption that Draco would insist he was not fine and start an argument.

Keeping his eyes on Harry's, Draco reached up and smoothed a lock of hair aside from his forehead, baring the lightning bolt scar. Then he leaned up and kissed it. Harry's face was an expression of utter confusion when he retreated.

Draco didn't make a mention of it. He just squeezed Harry's hand and watched as his eyelids fluttered slowly, then drooped shut. His body relaxed with a sigh. Draco looked at his corrupted right arm and shook his head.

I may not love many people, but I can protect those I do love. And if what Harry needs from me right now is unconditional support, that's what he'll have.

He won't need it forever. Draco smiled briefly. That's good, because I can't give it forever. But surely we can alternate in giving each other what we need. It shouldn't be all my part, the way it so often seemed during those first few years when I was Harry's friend and he did everything he could to drive me away, and it shouldn't be all him, the way it was for the past week. And it's probably a good idea to stop counting debts and settling scores. What matters is that we love each other and we're going to be bound together, not who comforted whom on a particular day in April two years ago.

Draco felt an odd melting sensation in the center of his chest. A moment later, he was certain he had actually *felt* himself passing through another of the numerous gates into adulthood.

Such a long, long road. But I suppose I'll always be passing through them, as long as I live. Trying to insist on just one way of dealing with problems only gets you frozen emotionally. Or killed.

Draco sat calmly then, holding his lover's hand, because Harry needed it and because he wanted to and because he could.

~*~*~*~*

Chapterlette: An Altered Man

Lucius Malfoy knew there were many people who would pity him. He had lost the one person in the world he most unconditionally loved, and he was dependent on his son's sufferance for everything from daily bread to daily breath.

He did not show a sign of it as he strode down the middle of Knockturn Alley. That was always the first step, the one that fools who dismissed it as a game of masks and proper posture refused to understand. Look as though he did not care, and many people would believe he did not. That decreased confrontations which would have taxed his energy and perhaps let emotions come to the surface that his mask was not ready to bear.

They might say that Malfoys did not know how to mourn. But they had never said that they did not know how to survive.

He halted at the entrance of a shop with dust thick around the door. Inwardly, he smiled. *So Master Seth has not changed the tricks that he uses to discourage all but his special clients*, he thought, and swung the door open, the cane he carried along with him clicking as he strode across the floor.

Inside, the shop was mostly dark and quiet, but with a few carefully-placed torches and lamps that cast a panoply of light. Lucius knew the shadows they cast were actually more important. He tugged on his gloves and waited.

The door at the back of the shop opened, and a small, cramped man scuttled out. He was bow-legged, with a seamed face and cracked yellow teeth. He wanted to be sure that he was not accosted on the streets daily by people who knew about his mastery. That appearance meant they had to look beneath the surface to find his skill, and many wizards and witches who considered themselves people of taste couldn't do that.

He stopped when he saw Lucius, and his frog-green eyes widened. Then he gave a little nod. His head was like a frog's, too, sunk low on his shoulders, and with almost no neck where it disappeared into his torso. "Mr. Malfoy," he croaked. "Is there something Seth can do for you?"

"Stop pretending that you are a house elf," Lucius muttered, and then reached into his sleeve. Seth watched intently, which made Lucius smile. The man said he didn't have a wand. Of course, he did. No matter how disgusting he might be, the Ministry had never made that a reason to deny a wand to anyone.

Now, if they were able to see beneath the glamour...

He handed over the document which he'd created, an intricate image drawn with the help of a spell that would let him picture exactly what he imagined; he had little artistic skill to draw on himself. There had once been a tradition of teaching each Malfoy heir a small art, such as song or poetry or portraiture, but that had died with his father's generation.

Seth unrolled the scroll and studied it for long moments. Then he nodded and said, "I can build this, Mr. Malfoy, easily. But—" He paused for another long moment, and Lucius knew he was reading the request at the bottom of the page.

When he lifted his head, he looked troubled, but also regretful. "I am afraid that I am only a simple smith, Mr. Malfoy," he said. The frog-like sound had returned to his voice. "I do not have the intense magic to blend the final ingredient with the chains." He tried to return the scroll to Lucius.

Lucius didn't accept it. "Yes, you do."

Seth only blinked a few more times, eyes seeming to stand out from his face more than ever. "This would require a wizard of exceptional skill, Mr. Malfoy," he said. "And I've never claimed to be that. If I were, I should have more customers!" He laughed, a sound like a toad bursting.

Lucius did not join in. Instead, he concentrated on the powerful glamour-destroying spell he'd looked up in the Black library, and flicked his wand casually in Seth's direction.

The man let out a cry as his disguise splintered, shards of shadow and light flying in every direction. And suddenly he was revealed as being taller than he had appeared, with clear yellow eyes not that different in color from some of the Light pureblood families', and an aura of magic that surged through the small shop and nearly brought the ceiling down.

Of course, when they saw the rest of his body, most people would understand why he hid those features. His spine shimmered

with sharp black spikes, which his hair grew into. Heavy eye-ridges covered his golden eyes, and the blue-black scales ran from his face back into a tail that he used to balance like a third leg. Leather wings extended from the middle of his back, flapping to make sure he didn't fall over from the shock of the glamour breaking. When he hissed at Lucius, a forked tongue stabbed past glistening fangs.

Lucius could feel the shadows around the shop bending. He ignored them. Yes, Seth could easily destroy him—and, even more than that, the creature who lived in the shadows here could destroy him—but that didn't mean he had to be afraid. He had a bargaining chip far greater than the challenge of forging chains such as he wanted.

“There is another halfling like you,” he told Seth, just as the shadows crept around his ankles.

Seth flung up a hand, and the shadows halted. Lucius saw them coil out of the corner of his eye, forming themselves into a mighty snake with no head, but several reaching arms and many champing teeth. He nodded slightly. Seth's father had been an ordinary wizard, but he had traveled between the paths of Dark and Light and sought—or perhaps been taken as—a mate by a female of that race of headless creatures who had once hunted wizards.

“You are lying,” Seth breathed.

“I am not,” said Lucius, without turning a hair. “You could tell if I were lying, Master Shadow-Weaver. She is the daughter of one of the Yaxleys. Jacinth is her name, and Lazuli Yaxley is her mother. Her father stays near her even as your mother does you.” He nodded to the shadow watching him, and forced himself not to flinch when he felt teeth scraping gently along his cheek, shedding a layer of skin off. “She has not, of course, announced that she would like to live without a glamour—she is not stupid, and her mother knows the temperament of the Ministry right now—but her mother is determined to have that freedom for her someday, and the vates has promised to see that she achieves it.”

“So he will help halflings?” Seth breathed. “Not only magical creatures, and not only wizards, but those of us who are both?”

“Yes,” said Lucius, and this time the emotion he hid was disgust. He did not care how much Harry was committed to helping creatures like this. They were still reapers of flesh and blood, and their kind had been enemies of wizards for generations on generations. To cross one's blood with them was worse than merely tolerating their existence. “And I will put you in contact with Lazuli Yaxley—if you forge me the chains that I requested.”

Seth looked at him in silence.

“I know that you can blend silver and hatred,” Lucius said coldly. “Your mother's kind hunt between Dark and Light. Your skill is mating the impossible. You can do this.”

Seth inclined his head slowly. “I can,” he said. Long practice had evidently given his tongue the ability to move between those teeth and still produce reasonable English. “May I inquire when you want the chains, and for what purpose?”

“No later than the second night of the full moon,” said Lucius. “And they are to capture and hold a werewolf who hates me.”

No more explanation was needed. He handed over the little payment Seth required of him, and left the smith and his strange mother behind. He had already resumed his glamour before Lucius left the shop.

Lucius walked away with a faint smile. He had his plans on how to matter, how to work his way into people's lives, even now. And putting Harry in contact with another halfling would help insure his continued importance.

Now he must do what he could to find Hawthorn—the location of the burrow had faded in his mind when his service to Voldemort ended, and he had never approached it save by Apparating in any case—and taunt her so that she would come after him.

He intended to catch and hold her in werewolf form with the chains Seth would forge, but in order to get her close enough to catch in the first place, he would need to use himself as bait.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Six: Their Sacrifice

Harry opened his eyes slowly. As an immediate improvement, he thought, the lack of screaming pain in his right arm was hard to defeat.

He became aware of someone holding his left hand and restricting him from moving it when he tried to reach for his glasses. Blearily, he turned his head and fixed his eyes on Draco, who sat in a chair next to his bed.

“Hello,” Draco breathed.

Harry stirred for a moment, then lay back against the sheets; even he wasn't sure what he would have done or said. The look in Draco's eyes had caught him entirely off-guard. It simply said that Draco was glad to have him back, and probably glad that his arm no longer hurt him. There was none of the scolding Harry had feared, no certainty that he was an idiot and Draco was always right, right, right.

Maybe right now there isn't. Does that mean he isn't going to talk to me about my arm?

Draco dashed that conception to pieces a moment later when he said, “How are you feeling?”

“Better than I was.” Harry deliberately shifted, and though the blankets rasped against his skin, it only felt like an itch, not the pain of a torch it had before. Taking a deep breath, he looked at it.

The blackness was almost entirely gone, except for a few flakes and slivers still embedded in the new, red-rough skin, which reminded Harry of a sausage with how shiny and stretched it was. His hand had two healthy-looking fingers, the smallest and the thumb, and crisp black in between. He stretched them, and hissed, wincing.

“Madam Pomfrey did say the hand would take longer to heal,” said Draco. “Something about more delicate nerves in the fingertips, I think. But the rest of it feels better?”

Harry nodded. “I don't remember much about the past few days,” he said, and blinked at how hoarse his voice sounded. Well, that told him *one* thing about those days, even before Draco murmured it.

“There was a lot of screaming. Professor Snape wasn't kidding about how painful that potion was.” When Harry flicked a glance at him, Draco was pale. “I can see why some people would prefer to die rather than undergo it.”

Harry could access hazy memories of true agony, the kind that might drive him to the edge of sanity, if he reached for them. He didn't reach for them. “How long was I under the potion's influence?” he asked.

“This is the second day.” Draco retrieved his glasses for him then, and slid them over his nose, his touch lingering on Harry's cheeks. He still hadn't let go of his left hand. “You've had visitors, but nothing that can't wait. Voldemort hasn't made any attacks.” He grinned, abruptly, the kind of grin that reminded Harry his Animagus form was a fox. “And Snape and your brother have both been dancing attendance on you like hens with one chick.”

Harry could feel himself flush in embarrassment, but—well, he could not blame them. If he'd been screaming as hard as his throat suggested, he would have inspired concern.

And—

And Draco was here, too, sitting beside him, notwithstanding the argument they'd had before he passed out, apparently. Harry took his lip between his teeth and worried it wildly. He could remember Draco coming in and sitting with him before the potion took hold, too, now that he thought of it.

Does that mean he's not going to scold me?

The silence between them felt as raw and stretched as the skin on his arm to Harry. Draco seemed comfortable with it, but then, he might have had a few days to make up his mind what he was going to say.

“Listen, Draco,” Harry began, deciding he should broach the subject first. “I'm sorry if I caused you distress with—“

He blinked as a finger was laid on his lips. Draco sat back when he'd fallen silent and regarded him with a calmness that made tears prick at Harry's eyes. It was a moment before he realized why. It reminded him of Narcissa. He looked away.

“I'm doing well, Harry,” Draco said. “I promise you. I'm not completely recovered from her death—“ his breath hitched a little “—and I probably never will be. But you had a point. Yelling at you for what you've done makes next to no progress between us. I resent you for not listening to me, and you resent me for treating you like a child.” Draco cocked his head, face still serene,

though Harry thought he could see how much effort the mask was taking now. “So we’ll try to change the way we speak to each other so as not to include that. It’ll call for efforts—“

“Sacrifices?” Harry asked, wondering if Draco really could change something that had been intrinsic to the way he spoke to Harry since they met. Among the first words they ever exchanged had been Draco scolding him for not calling him by his first name just after Harry was Sorted into Slytherin.

“*Efforts*,” Draco said, emphasizing the word and giving him a little glare, “from both of us. This matters, Harry. It matters more than anything we’ve ever done, and I don’t intend to let us slip back into a silence that hurts both of us.” His other hand reached forward and came to rest over Harry’s heart. Harry shifted, feeling vulnerable, but Draco didn’t move away. “So. Please. I’ll listen without scolding, and you’ll tell me what’s wrong. *Please* tell me what’s wrong.”

Harry wanted to pull back and raise the defensive shell he’d perfected in the last few months. Surely, if he trusted Draco not to scold, it wouldn’t work. That was just what *happened*. Harry couldn’t ask him to change, so the best thing would be to ignore it. Wouldn’t this effort to change, to force an unnatural bend into their bond with each other, end up hurting them both?

But...

He *wanted* to trust Draco. And Draco had said he was doing this of his own free will, not because he felt compelled by Harry’s magic or the threat of losing him. Distrusting his intentions now would call for a spasm of suspicion on Harry’s part that he didn’t feel capable of making.

And, Merlin, he did want to talk to someone.

Leaping off this cliff is no different than all the other cliffs you’ve leaped off.

“All right,” he said quietly. “But—I don’t think I’ll be able to talk about everything right away.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.” Draco’s voice had softened to nearly the croon Harry had used with him when he was grieving, and he grasped Harry’s chin and tilted his face back towards him. “What about talking to Snape? Can you do that?”

“The last thing he did was call me an idiot,” Harry said, feeling that old weariness rise up. “I don’t think I can ever change the fact that that’s what I am in his eyes.”

“He also brewed the potion that healed your arm.” The *lack* of chiding in Draco’s voice was what made him flush this time. “He loves you, Harry. No, he doesn’t always express it well. And no, I don’t think it’s fair that he calls you an idiot so much of the time and nothing else. But that’s another set of efforts that both of you will have to make. Can you do that?”

“It’s not fair,” said Harry after a moment, “when you ask things instead of demanding them, you know.”

“Why not?”

Harry buried his head against his knees, feeling as though his life had just leaped into a dimension he had always wanted to see but never believed it possible to walk to. “Because,” he muttered, voice muffled by the cloth, “it makes me want to do them.”

Draco’s laugh was quiet, and he leaned against Harry in a flush of warmth from neck to hip. His hand stroked Harry’s hair in that possessive gesture he loved to make, but which now struck Harry as less a movement of ownership than of love. “That’s good, then,” he said.

Harry released a shaky breath. “I’ll try.”

“Good.” Draco pulled back and tilted his head up again, though Harry would have preferred to keep it bowed and sheltered. His eyes were mercilessly kind, which should have warned Harry what he was going to ask, but didn’t do it in time. “Are you going to talk about what you felt for my mother’s death now?”

Harry blinked and swallowed. “Do you want to hear—“

“*Yes*.” Draco’s voice was fierce. “I’m not as noble as you are, Harry. I don’t do things out of duty that often, or just because I think someone else needs them. When I ask what you think, I want to hear what you think.” The pressure against Harry’s body increased, and then he found himself turned around and laid sideways in Draco’s arms, so that his head was tucked beneath his chin. Draco nestled his head hard into Harry’s hair and blew it out of the way.

“It would comfort me to know that someone else was grieving her openly,” Draco murmured. “Most people have stayed out of my way, respecting my grief—or your magic, I’m not sure which—and of course far be it from Lucius to show emotion more than once.” Harry heard bitterness running under the surface of his voice, but it was gone before he could ask about it. “Now. Tell me.”

Harry swallowed, and swallowed again. If he let himself go now, he wasn’t sure he could pull back behind the barriers if this didn’t work. Draco would probably say that was a good thing, but with the war effort going on... Harry was not as sure.

But sometimes he had to make leaps. Sometimes he had to trust what people said, instead of demanding solid proof.

He laid his head back against Draco’s chest, closed his eyes, and began to speak.

Connor was waiting when Harry came out of the hospital wing, leaning on Draco and talking to him in a low voice. Connor frowned when he saw tear trails on his brother’s cheeks. *What was he crying about? Does his arm still hurt that much?*

“Harry!” he said, making his presence known, when he thought they would both have walked past the alcove where he stood.

Harry turned, and welcomed him with a broad smile. Connor controlled his immediate impulse to embrace him, though, given that he wasn’t sure his arm was completely healed. He settled for dancing around him and slapping his back in an awkward manner, then hugging him from the left side.

He probably looked ridiculous. But *Merlin*, it was good to see Harry back on his feet again and with two normal arms instead of one that was made of flesh and bone and one that was made of burned wedding cake, at least to the smell.

“How are you, Connor?” Harry asked, putting out a hand to touch Connor’s as he drew back from the hug. “How are matters with Parvati’s parents?”

Connor snorted. “Proceeding.” The Patils had invoked several ancient laws that no one paid much attention to any more from the Ministry’s books, trying to argue that their daughters should be returned to them under marriage bonds and the conditions of something called the “return of virgins.” Parvati had fought that one by sending a very detailed description to her parents of what she and Connor had done so far, and how even a deep enough kiss made her ineligible for that law. Padma and Luna had done even more, apparently, and this had so shocked the Patils that they had been silent for the last few days.

“And how’s your arm?” he added quickly, suddenly remembering that one of Harry’s favorite tactics to get people to stop paying attention to him was to mention their own problems.

“I’ll live,” said Harry. “It feels much better, though it’ll take me a few weeks to regain full use of my hand. Draco said that you were dancing around the bed while I was unconscious.” He met Connor’s eyes and held them. “Thank you.”

Connor waited a moment to see if Harry would say anything about Snape, but that appeared to be it. So he could graciously nod, instead of stumbling into a hasty explanation. Draco hadn’t told Harry, evidently, that Connor had earned a detention for hexing Snape. Of course, if they had only *told* him about the potion in the first place, instead of coming in and dumping it all over Harry’s arm without warning and sending him into a screaming fit like nothing human, then there would have been no need for hexes and no need for detention.

“Did you tell him about the visitors from the Squibs’ Association?” he added to Draco.

Harry immediately stood taller, and Draco glared. Connor supposed he’d been saving that news, too, until Harry was stronger. He just shrugged in the face of his brother-in-law’s glare, though. The request that the Squibs’ Association had for Harry wasn’t like any request he’d got from anyone else. He should know about it and face it as soon as possible.

In Connor’s opinion, there was really only one sound, sane decision to be made concerning their offer, but this was Harry. He would find six exceptions before breakfast.

“What about them?” Harry asked, and it was his Savior Voice. Connor made a face at him, which caused Harry to blink and cock his head a bit, and made him look more human. Connor approved. He wanted his brother to be around more often, not the Savior.

“They came to offer *you* help, you know, not request it,” Connor said. “And I think you should take the offer. You won’t *want* to.

You won't think they can spare it. But they said they want to, and a *vates* is all about free will, and so you can't stop people from helping you when they want to." He wondered if Harry would admire the elegant logic of this argument. Probably not. He was about to come up with an exception again, according to the way his face worked.

"I don't know what their offer is," Harry said.

Oh. Well, that changes things. But Connor was happy to explain. Draco's glare just grew more and more murderous, and he was tugging at Harry's shoulder as if he would spirit him away up the hall and make him stop listening. Therefore, it was on Connor's shoulders to prepare his brother.

"Most of the wizards and witches who work with Squibs don't have very much magic," Connor explained. "They're the only ones who can work closely with them, or otherwise there's just too many jealousies and rivalries." He felt he knew a great deal about it, after one of the visitors had cornered him and talked to him at length.

"That, and full-fledged wizards and witches don't want to associate with Squibs," Draco muttered.

Harry frowned at him. Connor said, "Don't be an arse, Malfoy, though I know it's very hard for you," and went on, because that was really all the notice Draco's comment deserved. "So they've decided, now, that they can continue their political work without their magic, which you need more. They want you to drink their magic with the *absorbere* gift, and become stronger to fight Voldemort."

Harry blinked. Then he blinked again.

Then he blanched, and shook his head.

"*Idiot,*" Draco hissed at Connor. "I was going to take time to prepare him, and—"

"No one wants to hear about your sex life, Malfoy," Connor pointed out, more intent on watching his brother's face. "He needed to hear this, and it's better he did before one of them tracks him down. Stop shaking your head, Harry. They *want* to offer it, you know."

Draco was spluttering in incoherent rage. Connor thought it was a good look for him. If nothing else, it meant he could continue the argument with Harry, and Draco couldn't throw in one of his distracting little asides.

"I don't want it," Harry said stubbornly. "I never—I *can't*. I can't make someone into a Squib who hasn't done anything wrong. I've always used that as a punishment, not a gift—"

"They want to give it over," said Connor. He had decided to keep hitting that one point. Harry respected free will. Sooner or later, he would have to respect the free will of people willing to sacrifice their magic. "They want to help in the war because otherwise they can't do much. The Squibs' Association doesn't have much power or prestige in the Ministry right now; they can't help you politically. They won't make a difference on the battlefield. They can throw support behind you in the newspapers, but few people listen to them because of prejudices like the ones Malfoy is spouting." Draco was by now almost blue with fury. Connor resisted the impulse to stick out his tongue at him. *He* was the patient, mature one right now. It was not his fault if Draco insisted on acting like a child. "Their magic *can* help you. Are you going to deny them the only way they can really participate in the war?"

Harry was white-faced and silent. That left Draco room to jump in, which Connor regretted.

"He shouldn't have to make a decision like this right now," Draco snarled, his voice so low that it sounded like some sort of troll talking. "He's barely out of the hospital bed, and they can wait—"

"You only think their cause is less important than others because of your idiotic prejudices," Connor pointed out. *Calmly, with only one insult, and full of good sense. I win this exchange.* "And I think Harry should be able to decide what he wants to face. At least this gives him a little time to think about it."

Harry bowed his head. Then he muttered, "Yes. I need time to think about it."

He started to break away from Draco, but Draco pulled him back against his side, and murmured into his ear. Connor strained to listen, and still hardly managed to catch the whispered words. "You can think in our bedroom and in my presence as well as anywhere else, yes? And I promise to give you silence if that's what you need, and only offer my opinion if you want it."

Harry hesitated.

“Efforts from both of us,” Draco said, which Connor didn’t understand, but which made Harry relax in his grip.

“You’re right,” he said, and nodded to Connor. “If you talk to one of them, let them know I’ll have decided by noon tomorrow.”

He and Draco went towards the dungeons then, leaving Connor behind with a furrowed brow. He knew he’d won. He knew he’d done the right thing in bringing this to Harry’s attention now, so he wouldn’t suddenly have it sprung on him when one of the members of the Squibs’ Association managed to find him.

And still he felt that Draco had the deeper bond with his brother, had won the war if not the battle.

It was infuriating, sometimes.

Draco had kept his word. Though he longed to tell Harry that he thought he should accept the offer of those wizards and witches foolish enough to make it—they were barely above Squibs anyway, and they wanted to associate with them, so why not give them more in common?—he held his tongue and watched as Harry sat on the end of their bed, his fingers rapping up and down the blankets.

He wanted to know what Harry was thinking, but Harry hadn’t yet offered to share. And Draco refused to get into ridiculous complexities of thought, thinking about asking about asking. He lay back with his arms behind his head and studied the canopy, and thought of Potter’s ridiculous behavior instead.

He seemed to believe that Draco’s closeness to Harry would involve exiling him from Harry’s side, and he was only totally at ease when Harry showed a preference for neither of them or when he was winning. Draco snorted. The fool had changed in some ways, but he didn’t seem to have accepted the fact that they had to deal with what they had, not what they wished they had.

Let us ignore the fact that you didn’t acknowledge that yourself until a few days ago, a voice that sounded like Potter’s whispered into his ear.

Why, yes, let us ignore it, Draco thought, and went on with the real business of his mind, which didn’t include listening to his Potter-sounding conscience.

Connor might wish that he could be Harry’s perfect match in battle and as a twin again, but he couldn’t. Things had changed too much from the days when Harry served him. And he also seemed to believe that Draco’s opinions were worth less than his own because he had been raised pureblood and of the Dark.

Fuck that.

Draco had already decided that he would be the more mature one. The fact that Connor had had to resort to insults in their latest competition only meant that Draco was an adult, and he a child. Draco would be the one who made rational arguments, who pointed out the necessities of war—which included letting Harry know about the Squibs’ Association at some point—and the necessities of having their leader rested and not preoccupied with minor matters—which included giving him some time to recover before he was assaulted with more responsibilities.

That had three advantages. First, it would change their relationship, and that should, hopefully, force Potter to grow up. Second, it would show Harry that his was the more adult voice, the one to be trusted if Harry had to make a choice. Third, it would give him immense personal satisfaction.

“Draco?”

He sat up at once, and moved down the bed until he sat beside Harry. “Yes?” he asked mildly.

Harry leaned back against one of the bedposts and regarded him in silence. Argutus had crawled into his lap as he dithered, or debated, with himself, and Harry’s left hand absently stroked his scales. Draco was pleased to see that the Omen snake was nudging at Harry’s clawed right hand, his tongue moving in small flickering motions that were probably hisses of concern. “Do you really think it doesn’t matter if I take their magic?”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Absolutely not. Much as I hate to grant him any credit at this point, Connor was right when he said

they chose to give it up of their own free will. It'll make you stronger. It'll mark you as someone who lets even the weak help, as much as they can."

"It could also make the Ministry think that I'm someone who drains any magic to become more powerful," Harry muttered. "And Merlin knows how Juniper would take that at this point."

"Let them think that," said Draco. He hadn't spent all his time in the past two days simply sitting at Harry's side. He'd also taken the time to read the newspapers, and he was confident that Harry's public image was better than he thought it was. "It won't change the minds of anyone who doesn't already want to believe the worst. And you can articulate your principles to anyone who's concerned. You take the magic of enemies and the magic that's freely offered, and that's *it*."

Harry's teeth were carving marks in his lip. He didn't reply.

"Can I ask," Draco said, "why you think you—" He stopped. *No, he hasn't said that he thinks he can win the war without drinking magic. I won't put words in his mouth, since he was so adamant about that last time.* "Why don't you want to take their magic, Harry?" he asked at last.

"It's another sacrifice," Harry snapped at once. "I'm not adverse to making them. I don't want other people to make them."

"Even when they choose to?"

Narcissa's ghost hung like tangible mist between them. Harry drew several deep breaths. "We knew sacrifices were going to be necessary to destroy the Horcruxes," he said. "I can live with that. I don't know that I can live with people giving up their magic to me."

"But you wouldn't mind that much if I were the one who could drink it," said Draco.

Harry jerked away as if stung, but Draco caught his chin and turned his face towards him, as he had in the hospital wing. Harry stopped trying to pull away at the look in his eyes, or perhaps the expression on his face; it had to be one of the two, Draco thought.

"That's the difference," Draco said. This time, he didn't think he was putting words in Harry's mouth. He only thought he was right. Truths twirled and spun around him like dropping swords, and he was, without warning, in the middle of that mental world he'd entered to convince his father to make him magical heir, and when he'd achieved his Animagus form. "It's not so much the freely chosen sacrifice you mind, or even the draining of magic. You don't resent Voldemort for having that ability. But you don't want the power."

Harry was silent.

"It won't corrupt you." Draco reached out and drew his hands up Harry's sides, ruffling the cloth of his robes over his ribs. "I promise, Harry. Just because you grow more powerful doesn't mean you'll become a Dark Lord."

"It's more than that," Harry whispered. "I don't *want* to be more powerful, Draco. I don't want as much magic as I have."

Draco blinked. He couldn't remember Harry expressing the thought in that form before. "And why not?" he asked, after he had tried to understand it several times and couldn't. More power was *always* a good thing, if only to prevent one's enemies from accumulating it.

"I don't want it," said Harry. "It's just—I could do many of the things that I do now if I were as powerful as Snape, Draco, and no stronger, or as strong as Indigena Yaxley. And how I gained it was mostly accidental." He paused, then pushed forward through a barrier Draco could almost feel. "And I don't want the dark part of myself to have access to it."

Draco leaned forward and kissed him softly. Harry responded, though Draco could feel the confusion in the gesture.

When he thought Harry was pleasantly dazed, Draco sat back and said, as softly, "I promise, Harry, a small increase of magic at this point won't matter. And you'll have both me and Snape—and your brother, and any number of allies and friends—watching your back. If we see signs of your abusing your magic, be *sure* that you we'll tell you. You don't have many meek people around you, you know."

That won him a smile. Then Harry's eyes clouded again. "And you do believe that that darkness exists in me?"

“I felt it the night Voldemort attacked Malfoy Manor.” Draco ran another comforting hand up his side. “And I’ll get to see it more closely come our Halloween ritual.” He raised an eyebrow when he saw Harry’s blank expression. “Or did you forget that that ritual is called the Casting of Shadows?”

Harry gave a shiver, and then said, “We’ll worry about that when it comes.” He reached out and squeezed Draco’s wrist hard enough to hurt, but Draco didn’t mind. If it meant what he thought it meant, at least.

And it did. Harry said, “I’ll go to them, meet with them, and—make sure they’re still serious about this. Then, if they are, I’ll accept that magic.”

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Potter—excuse me, *vates*,” the old witch who’d met him at the door of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom corrected herself. Harry found himself the object of a piercing, blue-eyed gaze that made him fight the impulse to step back, even though she was far shorter than he was. “My name is Theresa Keller. If you’ll come inside?”

Harry stepped inside, glancing around. It seemed that everyone in the room was a weak wizard or witch, and not a Squib. And it made sense that they’d chosen the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom; it was the most heavily warded room in the school outside the Headmistress’s office and the House common rooms. If something went wrong, the wards would provide protection.

It felt a bit strange to have so many eyes fixed on him, and stranger considering what he would do in a few moments. Harry felt a wave of reluctance, and nodded to Keller.

“Madam, have you changed your minds—“

“Absolutely not, *vates*.” Keller came closer to him, and again Harry had to look into her eyes. Merlin, she moved like a queen. Harry could only imagine how much she must have practiced that, in a world where many people would look down on her for her low level of magic. “We discussed this for months before we approached you, since the war first began. We want to give you our magic. And we want you to use it against the snake-faced murderer and his minions.”

She took out her wand and laid it down on the floor in front of her, never removing her gaze from Harry’s. The others all copied her. Harry could see a few of them sweating, but it seemed that none of them were about to back out.

So he couldn’t, either.

With a shudder of revulsion pouring down his spine, Harry opened his absorbere gift and began to drain them.

Keller, too, shuddered as her magic faded, but she shook her head and stood straighter afterwards, as if he had actually relieved her of a burden. Then others began to do the same. Harry did see tears on the cheeks of one woman, and he would have paused if he could, but she caught his eye and motioned him onwards with an impatient hand.

Harry did his best not to think about the magic passing into his gullet. Most of it was Light, and most of it tasted much better than anything else he’d absorbed. Even the Black artifacts tended to have an edge of Darkness to them that made them less fully comfortable to hold in his stomach.

And he held down the gibbering, mad fear of what he would become now with a boot on its neck. He had made the decision. He had said once that he would accept whatever someone else did of his or her own free will, as long as that action harmed no one else’s free will. And this was a gift other people were giving not for love of him—which would have made it impossible to bear—but for the war.

He had to put some of his more delicate sensibilities aside.

Of course, then he had to wonder if putting them aside meant he was forsaking his own principles, bending them for the sake of expediency, and that led him to the idea that it would be more selfish *not* to have taken the magic, and that made him accuse himself of excusing his own selfishness, and that sent him whirling down an endless chain of spiral thought, with only one answer at the bottom of it:

I don’t know.

He finished the draining at last. Keller nodded to him and turned one hand over, as if to examine what it looked like without magic.

“Thank you, *vates*,” she said. “Now we can be sure that we are part of something greater, and not feel useless.”

A wave of similar thanks rose from the others in the room. Harry nodded and smiled as much as he could, and left as soon as he could. He could feel the churning in his gut, and knew what would happen in a moment.

He ran to the closest loo, and only just made it before he sank to his knees, vomiting. He would not release the magic he'd swallowed, but the intense nausea had to come out *somehow*, and so it chose his physical stomach.

Harry closed his eyes when he was done, and shivered. He had made what he thought was the right decision, after listening to Draco's arguments, and Connor's, and the free will of those who wanted to give their magic up. He could only hope that this wouldn't prove to be the first step on a slippery slope.

He didn't know if it was. He didn't know if it wasn't.

The only thing he was certain of at that moment was that he wished he had been born an ordinary wizard, not subject to either such extremes of magic or the exhaustion of such decisions.

The burden had to be carried. That didn't mean he always wanted to carry it.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Seven: *Duramus*, All The World

Harry opened his eyes, and shivered. He felt as though all the skin on his body was rising, the way it did when Draco pinched a small fold of it, and tugging him towards the door of their bedroom.

Draco sprawled next to him, sleeping soundly, as the small snores made clear. He wasn't the source of this. Harry frowned and closed his eyes again as the magic traveled up and down, bothering his skin, worrying at it. He gnawed his lip several times, and wondered if the effect would go away if he continued to ignore it.

It didn't. Instead, it grew worse, with the pinch becoming actual pain. Harry hissed between his teeth, but sat up and turned slightly in the direction of the door.

Three things happened. The pinch eased off. Draco's arm fell across the empty space where he'd been, and he grumbled under his breath. And Argutus swarmed up the bed, his scales gleaming dully in the faint light Harry'd raised along his arm to see if he recognized the operation of a spell.

“You shouldn't leave without an escort,” Argutus hissed. *“Summon the one who smells like rose petals, and not the one who smells like self-pity. I want you properly guarded.”*

Harry shook his head. “I don't intend to leave the room,” he said. “I—“

The pinch immediately grew worse, tugging at him again. Harry let out a hiss that had nothing to do with Parseltongue, and which made Argutus curl his tail around his waist and tap him sharply on the hip.

“You have to leave,” the Omen snake insisted. *“But take someone with you. That's a simple compromise.”* He paused abruptly, tilting his head in the direction of the bedroom door, and flicked his tongue out. *“The one who smells like rose petals is already on the way from his room,”* he announced. *“The pain in your head has roused him in his arm.”* He sounded fascinated. This wasn't the first time he'd displayed that curiosity about the lightning bolt scars of the sworn companions, Harry knew, but he had never managed to explain them to Argutus's satisfaction.

Owen was coming, then. Harry sighed and held out his left arm so that Argutus could coil around it; he doubted his right arm could bear the weight right now. Argutus carefully arranged himself so that he didn't touch Harry's right arm, either, and wrapped the last fold of his neck around Harry's throat. Harry felt enveloped in warmth as he followed the pinch, and had to admit that it was better than going to face whatever this threat was alone.

Then he blinked and turned back, lifting his left hand and making Argutus shift in irritation. *“The one who smells like rose petals is waiting,”* he reminded Harry.

“I'm just leaving a message for Draco,” said Harry absently, and used his magic to create letters that would hang in the air and

start gleaming like fire only when Draco woke, so they wouldn't disturb his sleep before then. Harry explained that he'd felt the call of some magic that hurt him when he resisted, and he was going to find out what it was, but he'd taken Argutus and Owen with him. *There, at least that will prevent him from panicking if he wakes.*

He slipped out the door, and found Owen on the stairs. "What is it?" he asked, looking around as if he expected Death Eaters to burst through the walls. Given who he was, Harry thought the suspicion less ridiculous than it might have been in other circumstances.

"I don't know," Harry answered, and then nearly tripped down the stairs as the pinch and the pull intensified. "But whatever it is, it wants me out of the Slytherin common room." He made his way to the door of the common room. Owen's breath was practically stirring the hair at his neck, so closely did he follow. Once again, Harry could hardly blame him.

In the dungeon corridors, the pull changed to lead him upward. And it remained upwards no matter how many stairs they traversed, making Harry wonder if they would come out on the Astronomy Tower again.

As it turned out, they did. Then the pinch halted, and the pull ceased, and Harry looked around with a small frown. He couldn't see anyone waiting for him, and there was no sign of powerful magic or the manifestations that usually accompanied it, such as storms. In the distance, the Forbidden Forest lay quiet and dark under the slowly waxing moon, and the darkness shone with stars. It was a clear night, but not wondrous in any way.

No, wait, Harry saw, as he lifted his head and realized that some of the stars were vanishing and then reappearing again, as if something flew in front of them and blocked out their light briefly. He raised a hand, ready to fight if Voldemort had sent a dragon or something else to plague him.

The darkness in front of him grew a head, a neck, a long, slender body, and then an even more slender tail. Harry found himself faced with a manticore, perfect in every line from the human head to the scorpion tail.

Save for its color, of course, which was dark green.

Harry lowered his hand slowly. He knew that a manifestation of the wild Dark faced him. What he couldn't understand was why. It was a long way from Walpurgis, and even twenty days from Halloween, which was the counterpart of Walpurgis at this end of the year. Why bring him over the walls merely to see a new form?

The manticore stalked back and forth on the battlements, eyes on him all the time. Harry made sure to stand still. The wild Dark was changeable, everything from a spoiled child to a murderous river in flood. He wasn't sure what its mood was at this point, other than that it was contemplating him first instead of ordering him around.

Then the manticore lunged forward, tail striking for his shoulder.

Harry rolled out of the way before he even considered that perhaps this was a test and he should have let the sting descend. When the tail clattered on the stone and the manticore snarled in displeasure, however, he decided he'd been right to move.

He rose to one knee, and met the wild Dark eye to eye.

The hatred there astonished him. Then he shrugged angrily. *So what? It was on my side at Walpurgis when we defeated Falco, but that was mainly because Falco had assumed he could play with it, take what he wanted from it without paying the price, and it would never find out. It could as easily change its mind and decide that I annoyed it next. I wish I knew what I'd done to annoy it, though.*

The manticore abruptly leaped, rising above Harry's head and losing substance to spread out as a cloud. Harry prepared a wind to travel around him if necessary and whip the cloud away, to keep it from choking or poisoning any of the castle's inhabitants.

Instead of doing that, however, the manticore seemed intent on constructing an image or illusion. Harry watched in silence as the dark green smoke writhed and danced like a tangle of snakes, and then rushed together in an explosion, and then spread out again. If it was meant to represent something, he didn't recognize it, he decided, his mind clearer and colder than he would have thought it could be. The message was useless.

Perhaps the wild Dark knew that, because the next moment the cloud turned and soared away towards the Forbidden Forest. The sense of brooding hostility and power went with it, and Harry was sure that no one would pinch his skin now if he wanted to go back down and sleep beside Draco.

“What was that?” Owen whispered behind him.

“The wild Dark is displeased with me, apparently,” Harry murmured. “But I don’t know why. The last time it seemed this angry, it was because Voldemort and I had caused a great deal of magical damage at Midsummer, and it was taking the excuse to behave like a spoiled child at Midwinter. But I don’t know what I’ve done this time.”

“What if it’s not displeased with you so much as pleased with someone else?” Owen suggested, and his voice had gone tense and tight in a way that resembled the tug on Harry’s skin. “Voldemort, perhaps?”

“I can’t see it serving him,” Harry said. “The wild Dark puts itself in service to nothing. And he tried to capture its power once before, at Walpurgis. It has good reason to hate him.”

“Then I don’t know, my l—*vates*.” The eager tone had drained out of Owen’s voice. “Do you wish to go back to the Slytherin common room?”

“Yes,” said Harry, after a long moment of lingering and studying the sky. “I don’t think there’s anything we can learn here.”

Harry eyed the Hufflepuff table as he conjured a bowl of cornflakes from a tattered pillow. Something had happened in that House overnight, it seemed. Several older students sat with their arms around younger ones, reassuring them. Others cried, but tried to keep their tears hidden. Zacharias Smith’s face was like stone.

When McGonagall came in, grave, and clapped her hands to signal an announcement, Harry was sure of it. He wondered whether a Death Eater had been discovered among them.

Instead, McGonagall said, “A young Hufflepuff girl, Jessica Farthing, has gone missing.” The babble of whispers and gasps that rose up then almost overwhelmed her, but the Headmistress gamely lifted her voice and went on. “So far as we can tell, there has been no breach in the wards, and there is no sign that You-Know-Who is involved.”

That terrified rather than reassured them, Harry saw with a single swift glance around the room. If it wasn’t Voldemort coming through the wards to kidnap students, that suggested there was someone else in the school taking them, and who could it be and how could they be stopped?

“There are, at this point, no clues as to where she might have disappeared,” McGonagall continued, her face pale and her eyes overly bright. “There were no signs of a struggle, and no sign of blood or magic. Jessica’s wand remained where she had placed it, and none of her possessions were taken.” Harry winced. By the expressions around him, he wasn’t the only one who had made the connection: whoever had snatched Jessica seemed to have little interest in her comfort or her survival. “The other girls in the room with her heard nothing. The only thing that had changed at all from the evening before was that the torches in her room had burned out.”

Harry froze. His mind was filled with a vision of darkness moving in slowly from the walls, snuffing the torches, and then wrapping dark green claws around Jessica before she could scream.

He shuddered and folded his arms around himself. Immediately, Millicent leaned towards him, frowning.

“What is it?” she whispered, which made Draco turn around, and then lean in to rub Harry’s back when he saw the state he was in.

“I think I know the reason she disappeared,” Harry said.

“Well?” Millicent prompted. “*Tell* us, for Merlin’s sake.” Her eyes had narrowed, and when Harry looked at her, one hand was twitching, as though she were trying to control the impulse to hit something.

“The wild Dark,” said Harry quietly. “It summoned me to the battlements last night. It was angry about something, I don’t know what. It wore the form of a mantichore, and it tried to sting me. And the Headmistress said that all the torches in Jessica’s room went out. I don’t think that’s a coincidence, as much as I wish it was.”

McGonagall was saying something about people not walking alone now. Harry nodded along with the other students, though he had his doubts about whether that would work. They could resist Voldemort as long as they stayed behind strong enough wards. They could flee him, too; some people had already accepted the offer of sanctuary in France. But what could they do against the

wild Dark? It could pierce the wards whenever it wanted, take whoever it liked, and pursue people to other countries if it wished.

And Harry didn't know what it *did* wish. Its temperament was so unpredictable that it might not steal another child, or it might decide to take half the population of Slytherin. He found his heart aching as he looked towards the Slytherin first-years. Their House had been so proud to receive them, the largest share of the Sorting, the largest group of Slytherins they'd had in years. And now they might be more vulnerable than anyone else, if the wild Dark decided to extend its anger at Harry to his House.

Draco's hand, pinching a nerve on his arm to make him pay attention, caused Harry to shake his head and return to himself. Draco's eyes were intent. "I think you should tell the Headmistress," he said. "She's ultimately the one responsible for the children of Hogwarts, and so she's ultimately the one who needs to decide what to do."

Harry nodded, acknowledging the truth of that statement, and then stood. The Headmistress was making her way out of the room. He and Draco followed, and caught her near the doors.

McGonagall didn't even look surprised as she surveyed them. Harry supposed she had become used to linking strange occurrences and him. "My office, Harry," she murmured, and walked up the corridor.

Harry followed her, wondering if Hogwarts would have to close. If it did, he knew the safehouses he would recommend that people enter, and the offer of sanctuary in France might become more important than ever.

He was not sure what would happen to his own war effort without the library of books, the tense guard they were keeping on the Sword Horcrux, the central location that gave them a place to meet in crises—

And the sense of safety and security that the wild Dark had ripped away with one capture.

Minerva narrowly studied Harry. She had to admit that his theory made sense, though without more proof she was reluctant to accept it completely. And if the Ministry got to hear of it, they would demand the closing of Hogwarts, as they had before the term began, and all her time would be spent fighting that battle instead of attending to her students and her school the way she needed to.

Then she pushed the thought away. *Closing the school is a last resort, even in the middle of a war. If the disappearances get worse, it will be necessary, but we should make the point, in that case, that the wild Dark can take the children wherever they are, whenever it wants.* Minerva shivered despite herself, and looked at a shadow cast by one of the torches. *It is terrifying. But we cannot give up, even if the wild Dark is working with Voldemort. Too much depends on our winning the war for us to give up.*

"Headmistress?"

Harry's voice drew her attention back towards him. He was sitting up, his hands clasped in front of him and his gaze direct. "Are you going to close the school?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," Minerva said. "There isn't enough evidence. But if this is the only disappearance, then no. I wish to show those who might doubt that the war cannot destroy every facet of normal life. Hogwarts has remained open through wars, invasions, and the rises of other Dark Lords, and it has always offered sanctuary and safety to all who pass its gates. I would continue to do that."

"And if it's not possible?" Harry asked.

"Then and only then will I close it," said Minerva. "But if this is the only disappearance—"

"I can't guarantee that it will be." Harry's voice was soft, and his eyes had gone a dark green. Minerva understood. He wanted her to be absolutely sure of the seriousness of the situation. She already was, however.

"I know that," she said. "For now, we'll make every effort to search for Jessica. It's possible that she may have played a prank, and be hiding somewhere in the school. Mr. Smith tells me that she is the most mischievous of their first-years."

"And she left her wand behind?" Draco Malfoy snorted and crossed his arms over his chest, as if that were a defiance of all common sense.

"She's Muggleborn," Minerva said absently. "More used to doing without it." She shook her head and looked at Harry. "The

Ministry will bring pressure to bear on me. I know that. I will still insist on keeping Hogwarts open unless there is no other choice.”

Harry nodded in understanding, and then said, “Should we increase the defensive training and the tunnels out of the school we’re preparing, Madam?”

“Before we do that, Harry,” Minerva said, “we are going to check everyone’s left forearms. I do not want us betrayed from the inside.”

Harry nodded again. The darkness in his eyes had not truly lessened, but it had faded with a determination to go on that Minerva could feel burning in her own. They did not know the true intentions of the wild Dark yet, and it was probably impossible to determine or predict them completely. There was no absolute safety. What they must do was bow their heads and endure.

Minerva waited until Harry and Draco had left before she turned and glared at the Sword of Gryffindor hanging on the wall in its glass case. It radiated smugness, to her, and a perfectly despicable darkness that made her conscious of her Declaration to the Light as few other things did. She rose, strode across the room, and rapped her knuckles against the glass case.

“We’ll destroy you yet,” she whispered.

A dark line shimmered along the Horcrux’s blade, and it hissed like a cornered viper. Minerva went on staring to show that she was not impressed, and did not care. Tom Riddle frightened her, but he could not make her back down. And a shard of him was less frightening than the full thing.

“You’ll pay,” she told the sword. “For threatening us, for being what you are, for corrupting the Sword of Gryffindor.”

The dark line appeared again, but this time it was shrinking back in wariness. Minerva smirked and turned to decide what she was going to tell the school about the attack of the wild Dark.

Draco lifted his wand and cast *Lumos* to light the hallway ahead. After a careful glance down it, he turned and nodded to the three first-years clustered behind him. They immediately followed him like a gaggle of ducklings.

Draco forced down the contempt that might have risen to his throat, and placed protective feelings there instead. He was responsible for escorting the first-years back to their common room. If they reached safety, it was to his credit, and if they didn’t, that was to his discredit.

And besides, they were Slytherins, which immediately made them better than some of the other children he could have been escorting. They’d shown little fear, and didn’t put up much of a fuss when he told them he’d be leading them around through the dungeons today. In fact, one of them had excitedly asked if he was *the* Draco Malfoy, partner of the Boy-Who-Lived, which had been pleasant. So long as they stayed in light and not shadows, and so long as they didn’t ask too many inane questions, Draco didn’t find it hard to put up with them.

“What is Harry like?” the same one who had asked him his name asked now, trotting to keep up with him.

Draco snorted and glanced down at her. It had been three days since the Hufflepuff girl’s disappearance, and that was obviously long enough for the best of them to recover their spines. “You know what he’s like,” he pointed out, amused. “You’re in the same House with him, and you eat at the same table with him every day.”

The girl munched a strand of her hair. “Yes, but never close,” she said. “And I don’t think anyone knows him like you do.”

Draco rather liked that. Whether it was honest appreciation or a bit of flattery that the girl was learning early, it suited her.

“Quiet,” he told her, as they rounded a bend in the hallway and Draco again cast *Lumos* ahead of them. “Much quieter than you’d think someone Lord-level could be.” The girl nodded seriously. Draco thought she was Muggleborn, but the smart ones, the ones who knew that other people in Slytherin House wouldn’t make exceptions for them, took the time to look up wizarding terms. “And of course he had a horrible childhood, so he learned about compassion and pity and goodness, but also pain. And I’m the one who helped him recover from that pain, to a large extent.”

It was no more than the truth. Besides, it made the girl’s eyes glow. Draco felt a corresponding swell of pride in his chest.

“You must be a hero,” she breathed.

“I’ve often been called that, by the people who know me.” *Stretching the truth a bit does not hurt either.*

“What about—“

And then a shadow passed over them, and Draco came to a stop in absolute darkness, heart pounding. He heard a shriek behind him, and spun around, trying his best to raise light against the thick, inky cloud. He couldn’t do it. The words froze on his lips, and even seemed to freeze in his mind, so that he couldn’t remember the spell. He closed his eyes and shivered.

He recognized the cold presence hovering near him. It had been with him last Midwinter, when he Declared. Harry’s suspicion that the wild Dark was behind these attacks was correct.

Startlingly, that just made him angry, instead of longing to crouch in one place and abject terror until the darkness took what it wanted and went away. He lifted his wand, though his arm shook, and snarled, “*Incendio!*”

A torrent of flame sprang from the end of his wand, and the darkness became dancing shadows. Draco looked around fiercely, and saw the two first-years who had followed him huddling against the wall, trembling madly, but unhurt.

The girl who had been walking beside him and talking to him about Harry and his own reputation was gone.

Draco knelt to look at the floor, though he already knew what he would find. No trace of blood, no dent in the stones, and only the lingering taste of cold and powerful magic in the air to claim that anyone but a wizard or witch had ever been there.

The other two children’s eyes were so wide they looked set to fall out of their heads. Draco took a deep breath, and rose to his feet, and did what he had to do.

“To the hospital wing,” he said quietly. Madam Pomfrey had dosed the girls who shared the Hufflepuff’s room with Calming Draughts. These two would need it, too, when the shock wore off.

Luckily, it hadn’t worn off yet, and they began to walk without complaint. Draco swept the corridor with his eyes again.

For one moment, he froze, thinking that he saw the outline of a manticores against the stones, but then he realized it was only a shadow. He shook his head and hastened after the first-years. His hand shook when he tried to hold up his wand, and he decided that he might need some Calming Draught himself.

Peter stood in front of his NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and narrowed his eyes when he noticed how many of them were talking among themselves rather than facing the front. “*Attention,*” he said sharply.

They paid attention at once. Draco Malfoy was the palest of them, but understandably so, Peter thought; he’d seen the latest first-year, a Slytherin, vanish right in front of him. Harry leaned forward beside him, one hand firmly on his boyfriend’s back. Peter nodded. So long as they didn’t engage in more of a display than that in his class, he could hardly reprimand them. Draco had needed the comfort, and Peter had actually been surprised that he was returning to classes so soon.

“The Headmistress has directed all the older students who can to learn spells of fire and light,” he said. “And I promise you, I have some spells that you can learn even if you’re Declared Dark.” He let his eyes linger pointedly on Draco for a moment, and then on the one sixth-year Ravenclaw who had likewise Declared. “Fire and radiance respond better to a Light wizard’s will, but there is a kind of light that has long been associated with darkness and eerie happenings.”

He lifted his wand and cried, “*Lux errabunda!*”

His wand began to glow. Peter had to concentrate to force the spell out—it tended to resist him, since he was Light and not Dark—but in the end he made it work. He heard his students gasp in wonder as the air around him swirled with a thin line of poison-green radiance, almost the color of the Slytherin crest.

“This is the Wandering Fire,” said Peter, “the cousin of the lights that dance on ships and which the Muggles call St. Elmo’s Fire.” He smiled as the green light curled away and lined Draco’s chair and the chair of the Ravenclaw with insistent brilliance. “It can shine in the midst of smoke and storm, and it never goes out until the caster wills it so. There’s some hope that it might stay lit even in the middle of the wild Dark. *Finite Incantatem,*” he added, when the fire began to curl up, like a purring cat, on the

laps of the two Dark wizards. “And now, for the most powerful spell of Light.”

He turned to the middle of the room, and added over his shoulder, “Shield your eyes.”

He closed his own, even though this spell could not blind its caster, falling into himself and drawing on the strength he would need. He made himself think of clear, glittering sunlight, the full weight and burden of a July day, not the semi-constant gray light they had right now.

Then he cried, “*Lucescit!*” Day is breaking.

This was one of the few light spells not diminished and disempowered as the world turned away from Midsummer and towards Midwinter, because it drew on the memories and Light magic of the wielder, rather than the closeness of the sun. Peter felt light stab him through his eyelids, and heard several of his students cry out in wonder, and knew he had successfully cast the spell.

He opened his eyes and smiled at the light that spread throughout the room, not sourced in a glittering ball or a wand, as so many Light spells were, but coming from everywhere and nowhere. Where did a memory come from? This light came from the same place.

He told his students when they could open their eyes, and he was heartened to see hope on some faces where it had faded before, and that even Draco Malfoy had his head tilted back, hand clasped tightly in Harry’s, as if it were the light and not the darkness that would guide him through the days ahead.

We will last through them, Peter thought. We have to.

Harry pictured himself drifting in darkness. He held onto the vision even as he sank into sleep, and dived further and further into himself, until he was once again walking—though this time in dreams—through the landscape in which he’d arrived to defeat Tom Riddle.

He saw the fence ahead, and the black pool, and shivered convulsively. But this was his best chance of figuring out the wild Dark’s intentions and defeating them if he could.

There had been no more disappearances since Amanda Bailey vanished, but there had been many times when torches had burned out and only light spells had kept people from dashing in multiple directions. The demands to close the school were coming more frequently from the Ministry now, though McGonagall had so far still staved them off, and several parents had removed their children from Hogwarts already.

What haunted Harry most was the expressions on the face of the refugees he passed. They had come to the school for safety, and now they were finding out that danger could follow them inside. Harry would spare them that, if he could, just as he would spare the students the slow-burning panic that was spreading through them.

He leaned on the fence and stared into the still water. A moment later, a pair of deep green eyes, many times larger than his head, opened and looked back at him.

Harry knew he would not be able to enter Voldemort’s mind and learn his plans undetected as he was. He was too Light, and he would stand out on the darkscape that was Voldemort’s thoughts like a firefly in a blackened room.

He extended a hand downward. The water slurped, and a hand rose from it, stretching forward to meet his.

But he had come to the darkness in his own mind for several nights now, and what he had suspected was true. He could access the connection between him and Voldemort that way, too. Dive deep enough, coat himself with enough darkness and enough dominating will, and he could swim across the boundaries in such a way that Voldemort would be extremely unlikely to sense him, because Harry would feel like a part of his own mind.

The hand clasped his. Harry shuddered as an echo seemed to travel through him and into the creature in the pool.

It was risky. He would move slowly. He would have to understand more of hatred and loathing and madness than he now did, and share Voldemort’s thoughts for a longer period of time than he ever had, performing this Legilimency even when awake. He would probably drift for a while before he learned anything useful, because he wouldn’t dare rise to the surface of the Dark Lord’s mind until he was sure Voldemort wouldn’t notice him.

He swung his legs over the fence and slid towards the dark water.

But they had that time, if Harry's estimation was correct. The wild Dark's next time of greatest power was Midwinter. Whatever strike Voldemort had arranged with it—or it had arranged for itself—was likely to come then, not on Halloween or at any point in between. Halloween was a special day for wizards, but it had never been a day when the wild Dark showed any especial power.

He felt the water creeping towards his face, and he closed his eyes in sheer reflex.

They had no other way of learning what Voldemort's plans were likely to be, no spy in his camp or any possibility of gaining one. If Harry could learn anything from this, even a scrap of information, it would be valuable. The people around him could, as Draco had informed him, tell if he started acting differently and abusing his magic; Snape would pull him out of the bond if that occurred. And—Harry knew this was the true reason Snape had agreed to this—it would give him practice with his Legilimency and a way to know the darkness within him.

Harry let the creature pull him towards the bottom of the pool, and set himself to learn what the darkness was like.

After all, it *was* him.

Step, and step, and step, and step, and the final rune was laid. The circle, made of blue-purple stones, each inscribed with the letter of a name as well as a rune, began to glow. Henrietta stood surveying it with quiet satisfaction.

She didn't stand within the circle, of course, but outside it. This was a summoning circle, meant to call on a certain person.

And even then, in this case, it wouldn't actually make that person appear in the circle; that took both more time and more magic than Henrietta had. It would simply attract the person's attention, nudge him to come closer, make him, possibly, betray himself and think it was his own conflicted impulses that led him.

Henrietta knelt and traced one finger over the first four runes, from stone to stone. E-V-A-N.

She *did* intend to have some fun with this, before the end.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Shackles of Silver

"And do you really mean that, Mr. Malfoy?" There was delight in Melinda Honeywhistle's voice, but mixed with it was terror. Lucius found it provocative. A pity that he needed this woman to spread the story that he'd decided on to bait out Hawthorn. He would have enjoyed baiting *her* in and destroying her, if only to prove to himself that he still could.

"I do mean that, Mrs. Honeywhistle." He flicked at a spot of dust on his robes. He wore dark blue ones, the finest left to him, as he stood in front of the group of five reporters he'd summoned to the Ministry Atrium. No one had yet tried to stop them, perhaps because they weren't yelling, though they had received some suspicious glances from the Aurors on guard. "Working for Voldemort—" he watched in satisfaction as some of them flinched—"is not only the opposite of grand and glorious, but it is, in the end, ineffective. He had a strong hold on me compared to most other people. I was under the Imperius Curse when I first served him, after all, and that leaves traces in the mind." He watched as the reporters nodded wisely. That was not true, of course, but none of them knew much about the Unforgivables—not many people did—so Lucius had little fear that his lie would be found out. "And then there's the Dark Mark." He touched his left arm, and watched as their eyes followed his hand in wary fascination. "And I still managed to break free."

"It cost the death of your wife to do so, though, didn't it, Mr. Malfoy?" asked a fat, pompous man from one of the minor morning papers.

Lucius inclined his head. "It is true, and regrettable, that Narcissa died in the same battle where I freed myself, yes. However, that does not make the two things connected." He raised an eyebrow, and the reporter had the grace to flush. *Too bad that he does not have the grace to do much else.* "Voldemort cannot control the people he does have. The people who serve him do so out of fear." He paused a moment, and then let a sneer slide across his face. "Or hatred, as Hawthorn Parkinson does. She is a werewolf, and Voldemort has played on that mindless trait in her, encouraging her to surrender to her rage. She could, perhaps, have escaped like I did, but she has made no effort that I can see so far."

“Aren’t you worried that she might hear about this and come to take revenge on you?” Honeywhistle asked, even as she scribbled madly on her scroll.

I am hoping that she will. “She will not dare,” said Lucius. “Those who serve Voldemort serve out of fear, at the bottom, unless they manage to pull free like I did. She might dream of confronting me, but she will not actually do so.”

They asked him a few more questions, but his point had been made. Lucius had carefully crafted his words so that they would chip at Voldemort’s formidable reputation, and make joining the Death Eaters seem less the opportunity for Dark wizards than the refuge of the coward.

Most of all, he had baited the hook to make it irresistible for Voldemort to punish him by sending Hawthorn after him.

He did hope.

He moved casually out of the Ministry when the press conference was done, avoiding the Aurors who drifted just as casually after him. They quickened their pace to capture him in the alley outside the telephone box, but Lucius Apparated without looking behind him. Even if they could have traced his Apparition, they would have to be braver than they looked to follow him into Knockturn Alley.

He landed outside Seth’s shop, startling a thin, ragged owl who flew up to the roof of the building and screeched at him. Lucius gave it a flat, unfriendly glance, and thought of hexing it. Then he reminded himself that he would need his magical strength for the next few days. Tonight was the first night of the full moon, and while Hawthorn might come hunting him, there were two other chances for it, too.

He entered the shop through a swirl of dead leaves and dust, and found the halfling holding a set of silver chains and a muzzle as if he’d been expecting him. He almost surely had, Lucius thought. He could see through shadows, and his mother could scout for him if someone used magic to baffle his senses. Lucius was not aware of any magic that could muffle the senses of *that* hunter.

“They are ready, Mr. Malfoy,” said Seth quietly. When he listened, Lucius could hear the slightest tinge of a hiss to his voice, but he had really adapted to speaking English remarkably well. “I almost wish I could keep them. They are beautiful, are they not?” He spun the chains, and sighed.

“I have brought the Galleons you requested,” said Lucius simply, and laid the bag down on the counter. Seth eyed him with those frog-like eyes for a moment more, then nodded and floated the chains over to him.

Lucius caught and studied them. They appeared to be pure silver, at first: four shackles shaped to catch paws extending from a single spine chain, with a muzzle to curl around the teeth. It was only when he leaned close to them and sniffed that he caught a scent of blood and dying things, and saw the dark shimmer that coursed up and down the fetters. Seth had forged them of silver and hatred, the way that Lucius had requested.

“You shall have your payment, Master Smith.” Lucius folded the chains up and floated them behind him, casting a Disillusionment Charm on them. He didn’t dare shrink them, in case that affected their properties when it came time to capture Hawthorn. “The little halfling girl is Jacinth Yaxley, and her mother is Lazuli. And I have written a letter to her asking if she would put her daughter in communication with you. She has so agreed.” He bowed and produced the letter from his pocket with a flourish.

Seth took it with trembling hands. Lucius watched him through narrowed eyes that he hoped concealed his contempt. Even if one *was* sure that one was the only member of one’s kind, and then found a second individual, that would be no excuse for trembling hands.

“It is real,” Seth said, leaning close to the parchment and flaring his nostrils. Lucius supposed he was absorbing Jacinth’s scent. Then he looked up and shook his head. “And now, you must leave.”

Lucius was more than happy to do so, especially since the shadows were stirring at his heels. The chains floated behind him. He had accomplished, with all luck, two steps of his task: luring Hawthorn to him, and finding a means to hold and capture her when she did come.

But the third, talking her back and out of her hatred, did not lie within his power. He would have to speak to Harry.

“Lucius.”

Lucius had to admire the balance in the boy’s voice, between wariness and outright aggression. It was admirable. And so was the way he rose to his feet like a dancer, long before Lucius got too close, and yet managed to make the gesture look like something other than one of respect.

His eyes were a deeper green than Lucius remembered them being, but he had heard rumors that Harry was exploring Dark Arts and did not find that surprising. Unusually powerful magic sometimes marked its new practitioners like that, for a time. He held himself with his magic snapping around him like a banner, somewhere between threatening and a mere reminder of what he could do. He was treating Lucius more like an enemy prisoner, even now, than a returned ally.

Lucius could not have expressed in words how much he appreciated that.

“*Vates*,” he said, with a deep bow, and saw a spasm of confusion cross Harry’s face. He must have expected the same haughtiness and pride as always. Lucius shook his head as he sat down on one side of the small table in a low chair, the only furniture provided in this designated meeting room. Harry had earned the title, never mind how miserable he had made Lucius’s life in doing so.

“I have a means to fulfill one of my bargains, and bring Hawthorn Parkinson back,” he said, and then dropped the Disillusionment Charm on the chains. He knew Harry would have sensed the magic already, but he wouldn’t have had the chance to examine them yet and see their nature.

Harry came slowly forward, his eyes narrowed and his nostrils working as he evidently caught some trace of the hatred. Lucius nodded. He still missed the pureblood grace and posture that would have been trained into Draco’s perfect partner, but there was something appealing about the primal way that Harry approached and assessed threats. He was not a creature of perfect breeding, but he was a creature of perfect magic. Lucius could appreciate the compromise.

“What are they *made* of?” Harry asked suddenly, breaking him from his contemplation.

“Both silver and hatred,” Lucius said, and smiled when Harry turned to stare at him. “Yes, there are people who can do such things, though one must know where to find them. In this case, a smith in Knockturn Alley.” He paused, then added softly, “Someone who is half human and half nameless, headless snake, rather like your friend Jacinth.”

Harry stiffened.

“I have already put him in communication with Jacinth, with her mother’s permission, of course.” Lucius watched closely, and saw the flicker of surprise Harry couldn’t hide. “I am not as committed to being the bastard as the man you once knew,” he said. “I told you that I had learned much of slavery, Harry. That is still true. Freely chosen service is superior to slavery in every way, where I once would have thought of them as equal and disdained service of any kind.”

“Then you did mean what you said to Draco?” Harry asked. “That you live at our sufferance?”

“I had to mean it, or the oath would not have taken, and the Dark would have told Draco I was lying,” said Lucius mildly. He watched Harry reassess him with a small smile. Of course, the more Harry believed that, and the more Draco did, the more freedom they would allow him, and the more he could do. He did not intend to betray either of them; the oath he had made would not allow that. But he did intend to have some room for leisure, and for traveling back and forth, that they would not allow if they still distrusted him.

Harry sat down on the other side of the table again, and asked, “So how do you plan to retain her? Even if the chains can hold a werewolf, there is still the problem of making her come to you.”

“I have just given a rather insulting interview to several papers that I expect Voldemort to see and take offense at,” Lucius said. “In it, I insulted Hawthorn. He controls her hatred by letting her sate her lust for vengeance sometimes; he must, or he would lose control of her to the werewolf savagery. He let her torture the Aurors in the raid on Tullianum. I believe that he will send her after me, since he knows that I am of no more earthly use to him as a servant, and I have dared to discourage others from joining him.”

“And tonight is the full moon,” Harry said.

Lucius leaned forward. “Yes. I am planning to arrange these chains around a certain doorway in the Manor, which I will stand behind. She will scent my blood and come for me, and the chains will take her. However, while I can hold her until morning, that

does not mean that I can talk her out of her hatred. That is where you come in, Harry. I need you to come in and do as a *vates* would, talking her free—either while she is still a werewolf, or when she returns to her right mind and shape as a woman. Werewolves cannot Apparate, but she has no reason not to go back to Voldemort the moment the moon sets.”

“And why should I help you keep your promise, Lucius?” Harry leaned forward in turn. The dark shade in his eyes had deepened. “You are the one who made the promise, and you are the one who said you would keep it. That means that I should not have to help you. And I am still, if one looks at it in a certain light, owed either your life or your magic, given your violation of the Alliance oaths before you returned to Voldemort.”

Lucius nodded. This was the dangerous moment. But he had survived more dangerous things. At least he knew that Harry had a fundamental compassion and an addiction to hearing his enemies’ side of the story that Voldemort did not. He leaned back and fixed him with a serious gaze.

“You have forgiven my crimes once, Harry,” he said quietly. “You know what I did during the First War, and unlike others, you do not have a reason to believe that I was under the Imperius Curse when I did it. You were telling my son that as early as your first year at Hogwarts.” He watched in interest as Harry’s hand tightened on the edge of the table, but until Harry actually splintered it and struck at him, he refused to be concerned. “You managed to forgive me for killing the relatives of people you knew, for murdering and torturing children young enough to be your siblings.”

“Are you tempting me to rescind that forgiveness, Lucius?” Harry snarled.

“I am asking you to extend it.” Lucius cocked his head. “I am doing what I can to atone for my crimes. I will atone in other ways if you ask it.” And he would. No matter what the end, his family’s future was bound up with Harry now. He had to stay on his good side and do as he said—some of the time—in order to *have* a future. Lucius did not always like it, but he could recognize reality when it stared him in the face. Ignoring that reality, as he had for most of the last year, had been his cardinal sin. “My life is the price if you ask it. I ask that it not be. I cannot help you, and I cannot help others, if I am dead. Likewise with my magic. I am very little use to you as a Squib. Will you forgive me again, Harry? Will you admit that I made a mistake in judgment, but that does not mean that you need to execute me?”

Harry’s hand tightened once more on the edge of the table, and his eyes looked like jade now. Lucius still remained relaxed. He knew the *true* danger signs with Harry, and they had not reached them yet. His head did not hurt from the explosion of magic being held back, for one thing.

“I should kill you,” Harry said in a low voice. “Merlin knows you have done things that deserve it.”

Lucius sat silent.

“And you don’t regret any of them, either,” said Harry, his voice rising in frustration. “At *all*.”

“I regret driving my son and my wife away.” Lucius leaned forward. “I regret what I did under Voldemort’s influence. I regret not recognizing right away where the best chances for me lay. Most of this past year will live as the Year of Regret in my memory.”

“But not what you did in the First War.”

Lucius gave a graceful shrug, and tilted his head so that he regarded Harry from behind one strand of blond hair. “If you wanted that, Harry, you should have asked Hawthorn Parkinson to be sitting here, and me to be running on four legs as a werewolf in Voldemort’s service. I will never do it again. But I refuse to live my life in the shadow of guilt that I did not feel at the time.”

Harry stared at him in frustration. Lucius remained still. He was what he was. He could not offer less than that to Harry’s cause, or his son’s. What he *would* have was knowledge, now, of whether Harry honestly intended to strip him of his magic or his life. He did not think Harry would leave him in suspense for long.

“Damn you,” Harry muttered, looking away.

“Well?” Lucius asked.

“I am going to come and talk to Hawthorn.” Harry rose to his feet and shot him an impressive, green-eyed glare, with *power* behind it, power Lucius could appreciate. “For her sake, though, I’ll have you know. Not yours.”

“I would not have it any other way,” said Lucius. “I know that I hold but a feeble purchase in your heart, as the father of Draco and the husband of Narcissa.” *For now*. He had the chance to change that, too, to prove to Harry that he could be valuable even

when all his promises were fulfilled. He had to, or make Harry think of taking his life and magic again someday, when someone pressed him and pointed out that Lucius was not contributing to the future Harry wanted to build.

Harry drew a deep breath, then let it go and shook his head. "I can't deal with you right now, Lucius," he said. "Go. Contact me when you've captured Hawthorn. I'll meet you at the Manor."

Lucius concealed a smile as he departed. If his life were seriously in danger from Hawthorn's teeth and claws, he suspected he could call on Harry earlier than the capture, and he would answer.

But it was just as well not to test that. He would let Harry have as long as he needed to think he hated Lucius, and believe that he was evil and no good for anything but keeping his promises. Eventually, he would flail those last leftover emotions out, and it would be time to build a new relationship.

That is a good thing about his focus on the future. One nearly always gets a second chance.

Lucius knew he had been right when he heard the howl splintering the air from the Manor's far side.

He checked the doorway around which the chains hung one more time, and nodded. The hatred woven into the silver was necessary to contain Hawthorn, since she was not a free-running wild werewolf; then silver alone could have held her. This would replicate the hold of the loathing that Voldemort had on her, and make her remain for at least the night.

Draco had had to lower the wards so that Hawthorn could cross into the Malfoy property without being stopped. He had taken the chance to remind his father of just how much he was in control, and how much Lucius had to depend on him for something that once would have taken him a moment to accomplish.

Lucius had looked appropriately humble and chastised all during it. It was much easier to dance around his son than Harry. Draco had memories of him that Harry did not, and Lucius could play on that love and their shared grief for Narcissa to make his son give him concessions when Draco thought he was exerting his own will solely.

Narcissa.

Lucius shook the thought of his dead wife away. She would have scorned him for being so soppy as to weep while he was waiting for an enemy.

And now he could hear that enemy hurling herself against the door of the Manor, which swung open before her. Lucius concentrated, and heard the skittering slide of claws on rich parquet. He winced. He would have to look into having that replaced—and convince Draco it was an important expense—after this.

He could feel her coming closer, partially because he could hear her growls and smell the musky scent of wolf, and partially because of the instinct that seemed to come to all prey when it was being hunted. Lucius heard her give a deep, throaty snarl of satisfaction when she arrived at the far door of his study. The woman in her recognized him as an enemy, and the werewolf was more than happy to use that as an excuse for killing, though it would have struck at anyone in its path.

A claw reached out, snagged in the middle of the door, and then wrenched backward, tugging the wood with it. Lucius winced again. That had been an expensive door.

And then Hawthorn—or the pale fawn bitch with amber eyes who would, in a few hours' time, transform back to Hawthorn—stood in the doorway, staring across the width of his study at what was apparently her prey waiting for her, defenseless, behind yet another open doorway.

Her mouth opened in a delirious howl of triumph.

Lucius looked down that shining gullet, lined with teeth, and let some of his fear drift onto his face. But he did not try to run. There was always the chance that Hawthorn would track a parallel course to him if he did that, and smash through walls instead of the doorway trap. He would not risk it, though it took all his control to stand still as she began her charge.

She leaped the desk in the middle of the study, and Lucius watched the graceful play and flex of her muscles, and thought of the old childhood tales of werewolves that his nurse had whispered to him when he was a child, to keep him inside the Manor on full moon nights. They were all the more effective for being true.

He did not know where he found the courage to keep standing there. Or, rather, he had not known until that moment that his will to survive socially and create an important position for himself in the future was as strong as his will to simply *survive*.

Hawthorn landed on the opposite side of the desk. Lucius watched carpet mound around her claws, immense, shining black nails, each one of which could inflict lycanthropy. He would have to make sure to move out of range the moment she was taken, so that her lashing paws could not infect him. Infection was *not* part of the plan.

She lunged.

Lucius commanded the chains to move.

They whirled out of the sides of the doorway and came down precisely where they needed to, the silver bonds finding and curling about her paws, the straight chain lashing down the middle of her spine, the muzzle closing around her wildly snapping jaws. Hawthorn screamed in pain as the silver burned through her fur, and then began fighting. Lucius heard the chains creaking. He wondered if she would manage to fracture a link. Fracture one, and all of them would unravel, since the magic and metal held every single one in tension.

But then she flipped over on her back, not a position that she would have taken on her own, and the chains bound her paws together over her belly. And her snarls subsided to whimpers as the muzzle clamped down and forced her teeth together. Lucius found him the target of maddened amber eyes, but no other strike.

He touched his left wrist, without taking his eyes off Hawthorn, and invoked the phoenix song communication spell to whisper, "She has been captured, Harry."

Harry arrived at once. When Draco restored the wards around Malfoy Manor to be what they had been—other than the fact that they were under his command and not his father's, of course—he had restored Harry's connection to them as well, which Lucius had given him as a gift at the climax of their truce-dance. Harry melted through the wards, and Lucius heard him hunting for only a moment before he came through the splintered doorway, crossed the study, and then crouched down beside the bound Hawthorn from the other side.

And he began to speak.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. He had thought Harry would wait until dawn; speaking to a crazed werewolf and trying to bring it back from its hatred was impossible. But if he wanted to try it now, and hope, perhaps, that her unconscious, the sleeping woman, would hear him and rejoice, Lucius was not about to hinder him. He conjured a chair not far away and sat down to watch.

"I know that you can hear me, Hawthorn," Harry whispered, his voice deep and intent. "And I know that you remember the talk we had before you fell victim to Voldemort again, the one that reminded you of the future. You suffered the loss of your husband, your daughter, your humanity—if you count the nights you've run without Wolfsbane—your dignity when the Aurors took you, and your freedom."

Lucius rolled his eyes. *Oh, yes, excellent tactic, Harry, remind her of all she's lost when you want to encourage her to come back.*

"But that *doesn't matter*."

Lucius blinked. He had never heard Harry sound so savage.

"It doesn't matter what you've lost." Harry reached out and let his hand hover over Hawthorn's bound paws, though Lucius could not see why. "It *doesn't matter*. Dragonsbane and Pansy are dead, Hawthorn, and you're alive. Your freedom can be restored to you. You've recouped your lost dignity with more than enough violence to answer for it. And your humanity can be retained mentally, if not physically, when you take the Wolfsbane Potion. You can live. You can deal with things. You have *no excuse* to give in to hatred like this, to fall victim to vengeance when we talked about rescuing you from it. Lucius, Indigena, the Aurors—they're worthless next to your pride, your soul, the choices you make."

I like that! Lucius shifted, and wondered if he should leave and just let Harry speak to Hawthorn in private. But considering the way that he was almost touching her now, the boy might let the werewolf loose to wreak havoc on his home. Lucius would prefer that not happen. He sat still, in the end.

"You are *you*." Harry leaned over the muzzled werewolf's face and breathed directly into her nostrils. He either didn't notice or didn't care about the aborted lunge that she made towards him, still taking, his voice a low, constant stream of encouragement.

“You are more than capable of walking your own road and making capable, intelligent, adult decisions. If I thought you weren’t, I would have insisted that you move into Hogwarts where I could watch you and lecture you about the importance of abandoning revenge. You chose to follow me. You know what ideals I espouse.

“No, what happened to you wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right.” And then he did touch her, running his hand along Hawthorn’s pale shoulder until he almost reached the spine chain. Lucius tensed. *Idiot. It is lucky that the chains will not release just because a human touches them.*

“But that *doesn’t matter*. It has to be overcome. It shouldn’t be lingered on and chewed over and over again until most of creation has forgotten what the original insult is. You should have been able to come to me and talk about the rage, the hatred. You’re still alive, and I know that you aren’t going to kill yourself, or you would have done it already. You’re still alive, and that means making decisions. You can’t give up and sit back and hope that nothing else happens to make you live.” Harry flashed a smile so bitter that Lucius stifled the urge to sit up and applaud. “Believe me, I know that intimately.

“You have to come back. In the end, there’s no choice to be made on the road you’re walking. There is a choice to be made on the road that opens up into freedom. Many of your decisions will be painful, but I have faith that you can make them. Why?

“Because you’re a fighter, Hawthorn. You’ve had to survive more in the past few years than anyone else I’ve known, and still you never gave up.” Harry leaned close to her, eye to eye. Lucius stared. Amber eyes met green, and held, and Harry never blinked, and the werewolf made no sound. “And this is a form of giving up, if you kill whoever Voldemort tells you to *just* because he tells you to.”

The werewolf lay perfectly still. Lucius shook his head slightly, frowning. He knew that couldn’t happen. Werewolves without Wolfsbane were savage, primal, elemental creatures, inspired by bloodlust. They weren’t supposed to listen and seem to consider what a human said.

Of course, most werewolves didn’t confront a *vates*, either. Lucius supposed that could have something to do with this.

Harry gazed into Hawthorn’s eyes for long moments, his hands smoothing the fur on either side of her muzzle.

And then he drew a deep breath and started the whole thing over again.

Lucius was waiting for the moment when the moon set, and Hawthorn began to change in form. For one thing, he would never have allowed himself to fall asleep like this, with a dangerous beast in front of him. For another, he knew this was the moment the chains, made for holding a wolf, would slip off a woman, and she would probably turn to fire a Killing Curse at him before she Apparated back to Voldemort’s side.

Harry’s voice had long since failed from repeating variations of the same words over and over again. Now he sat beside the chains, not flinching and not looking away as the werewolf’s body twisted and bent, the long legs shrinking, the paws clenching into hands and feet in a whirlwind of fur and claws, the tail retreating into the body, the muzzle retracting into the face. Even through the muzzle, the werewolf began a moan that quickly turned into a scream.

And then the chains fell limp and too big, gleaming shackles more tangled around than restrained Hawthorn Parkinson, whose blonde hair was flyaway, whose hazel eyes were still, to Lucius’s gaze, full of madness, whose clothes were ragged.

Harry knelt beside her and met her gaze head on. Lucius could not have described what passed between them in that moment, not least because he was sitting at an angle and so could not see Hawthorn’s face well.

“Do you remember what I said?” Harry asked. Or, at least, Lucius thought he did. He was only reading Harry’s lips; there was no sound left behind them to power his voice.

Then Hawthorn began to cry.

And Harry leaned forward and gathered her in his arms, bowing his head over her neck. Before he did, and shut his eyes, Lucius saw a look of such triumph in them as made him suddenly sure Voldemort was as good as dead.

He had to look away, then, just for a moment, as the sound of the soft sobs replaced the growls of hatred. At his command, the chains fell limp.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: The World Does Not End

Pamela Seaborn lifted her gaze from the intense contemplation of a redwood's root system, and stared across the distance. Since her eyes were still looking beyond the surface of things, her line of sight did not stop at the sealine, but swung out beyond that, into misty realms where she had alarms set up to warn her if a Dark Lord or Lady was moving towards the United States.

One was, she saw a moment later, but only incidentally. Monika traveled out from Austria, but her destination was the island in the middle of the Atlantic where the International Confederation of Warlocks would hold a meeting to discuss Britain's problem in keeping the Statute of Secrecy. Monika was traveling there as an apparent "servant" in the train of Evamaria Gansweider, the Austrian Minister of Magic. She did not intend to intrude on Pamela's territory.

Almost certainly, she intends to make some mischief, Pamela thought. In her experience, most Dark Ladies did, and Monika was the worst of the lot.

It didn't take her long to decide what to do. She had no immediate crises that required her attention, and it might be good to know what Monika was planning. She dimmed the range of her longsight and then stood, stretching her arms above her head. The redwood she'd been sitting under swayed very slightly in response to the gesture. Pamela smiled sadly. She knew it was only a fraction of the communication she could have from it if the webs on the great trees were undone.

"Bear me, old friend?" she murmured, and then began to climb.

When she was safe in the topmost branches of the redwood, two hundred feet above the ground, she leaned back and drew her magic around her, concentrating it just above her shoulder blades and just under the balls of her feet. The magic under her feet tightened and shivered, coalesced, then dissipated into the branches of the redwood. The tree began to whipsaw as if in a high wind. Pamela opened her eyes wide.

The tree flung her forward, a far greater distance than it should have been able to; her magic had pierced into the paths of Light, and given the redwood a portion of its power. Pamela flew away, out across the ocean, and when the moment came that her momentum couldn't sustain her and she started to fall, she pulled the magic on her shoulder blades into motion.

Some struck through her bones, hollowing and lightening them. The rest surged out of her back as the wings of a California condor. Pamela had done what she could to save the great birds, though she did not know if her effort would be enough, and in return had taken part of their natural magic into herself, to shelter it if their kind perished. The wings flapped now, and bore her steadily over the Pacific in the direction of the island. Pamela was confident that she would make it on time. The Confederation never did anything important swiftly. There would be greetings, festivals, a welcoming feast, and squabbles for precedence first.

"Pamela."

She turned her head, and nodded a bit. "Alexandre." The Dark Lord was one of the few powerful Dark wizards she found tolerable. Currently, he traveled ensconced in what seemed to be a heat shimmer, though Pamela could feel her thoughts growing firmer and more certain as it came nearer. Alexandre studied creatures of magic that were half-alive, like prophecies, and this was evidently a prophecy he'd bent to serve him, one that would never come true or only come true far in the future.

"You're here because of Monika?" he asked.

Pamela shrugged, and then worked her wings hard to catch a warm current. Her distrust of the Austrian Lady was well-known among the Pact. Besides, she avoided lying when possible. Lying *could* be a tool of the Light, properly employed, but Pamela tended to forget what she'd lied about and trip over it. "I'm interested in her interest in the Confederation, especially since they're dealing with the matter of Britain. And why are you here?"

She asked it as a joke; Alexandre would no more reveal his real motive than he would change his allegiance. Thus, she was startled when his haughty face bent into something like a true smile.

"Perhaps I am here for the same reason."

Pamela rolled her eyes. "You and Monika get on, Alexandre." Not well, of course—Monika got on well with no one, by the vice of her being so prickly and difficult—but he would not take sides against her.

"Perhaps not for much longer," said Alexandre, and, despite the conditional in the statement, Pamela was intrigued. She cocked

her head as they soared over an island where a building Lord-level power shimmered. There was a girl who would be a Lady someday, Pamela thought absently, if she reached adulthood without being killed. Most wizards and witches around a powerful one were aware of what that magic meant before the child was, and would watch closely, ready to descend and exterminate the child if he or she turned to the Dark. Light Lords and Ladies caused problems, too, of course—one of Pamela's inherent problems was trying to make sure she didn't change the structure of her country *too* much—but those of the Dark caused far more sheer destruction. It was a rare one, like Alexandre or Monika, who came to full power and Declared before someone else could locate them, evaluate them, and kill them.

Alexandre went on speaking then, drawing Pamela's attention to him. "Monika has—dangerous ambitions. I might not oppose them if they were confined to her own country, but they will not be."

Pamela blinked. Even knowing this was probably a lie, it was astonishing news. "Monika has always abided by the laws of the Pact." It had been an edge-of-the-teeth, skirting obedience more than once, when Monika almost shattered a protective law that was in place for an excellent reason, but Pamela had never known a true exception. What Alexandre was suggesting would be a departure from her pattern.

"Because she knows what is best for her, and has not the power to oppose us." Alexandre rolled comfortably to the side, supported by the yellow waves of prophecy-air he rode, and stared seriously at her. "Supposing she did? Supposing that she'd gathered such immense magic that she could face and kill any three members of the Pact?"

Pamela bit her lip and was silent. She knew how powerful the Dark Lord calling himself Voldemort had grown, of course, but she did not know how Monika could hope to have that power for herself. She was not an *absorbere*.

"Just supposing," Alexandre continued, his voice calm and casual, "that the wizard who was heir to that magic was weak—in Monika's eyes—and capable of being killed once he'd taken it? And now imagine that the person taking it from him was a witch who has studied all the varieties of reproductive magic until she breeds new creatures in her sleep. And imagine that she could create a way to change her body so as to take in some of that magic."

It would be possible, Pamela knew. Monika's specialty certainly argued for it. But she had not even thought of it, and so most members of the Pact would not have.

"She has spoken to you about this?" she asked quietly. *Remember, his answer is likely to be a lie.*

"One need not speak with someone else to notice a pattern of behavior." Alexandre inclined his head to her. "I know that you care for your redwoods and your condors, and that is nothing we have ever sat down and had a serious philosophical discussion about."

Pamela rolled her eyes. Trust Alexandre to compare the secret machinations of a Dark Lady with the open, well-known public devotions of a Light Lady. "You don't have to tell me if you don't wish to, Alexandre. I've hardly asked where your Horcrux is and how to destroy it."

Her only answer was a faint smile. It was a persistent rumor in the Pact that Alexandre had a Horcrux, but it hadn't ever been proven.

"And I can tell you if I wish," Alexandre said. "Say, if, for instance, and this is only conditional, I was interested in a coalition to stop a witch so suicidal, and restore the balance of power after the most powerful Lord in the world dies."

"And will he die?" Pamela asked.

Alexandre laughed and touched the air around him, petting the prophecy that bore him. "There are so many prophecies around Britain right now that the answer is uncertain. I wish you could see them, Seaborn. The country is *alive* with them as no place has ever been. It—"

Pamela cut him off quickly. Get Alexandre onto a tangent he felt inclined to talk about, and on and on he would go. "But you think it likely?"

"Monika does."

Pamela supposed that was the best answer she would get. "And if someone was interested in forming such a coalition to subdue Monika's impetuous plans, what would be the right answer to give you?"

“Willingness to talk about it would be essential.”

“Then by, all means, Prophetic Lord, let us talk,” said Pamela, doubly glad now that she’d decided to attend the International Confederation. She might see what Monika was up to, but more than that, she’d found a possible ally. And she would rather look to the further future than the immediate future.

Stories end, crises end, but the world does not. And in the cause of keeping it safe from Monika, I am willing to endure far worse things than Alexandre.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The House of Yaxley

Indigena shook her head hard, and then sighed. She had never thought she would mind being underground—she had spent large portions of her time there for more than a year, since she reawakened last September, and before that she’d been buried and regenerating among her plants—but now she did. The constantly falling dirt, the heat of magic as her Lord bred his basilisks, the stifling clash of too many people too close together, made even the tendrils in her body yearn for the air and sunlight.

Besides, she had another task, which she couldn’t carry out as close to many of the Death Eaters as being in the burrow required that she be.

She walked towards her garden, her eyes lowered, on the ground in front of her and not the slight rise of hills where she might reasonably expect him to appear. The bush that had grown the narcissus flower waved wildly at the sight of her, and Indigena knelt down with a smile, playing her hand lightly above it. She wondered what it would grow if left to its own devices, with only her presence to inspire it.

She never knew, because just then the person she’d been waiting for arrived. She saw a gleam of gold from the corner of her eye, and managed to convince herself not to stiffen.

“Must you bring that thing with you?” she asked Evan, standing and turning around. “The Dark Lord might sense it, you know.”

Evan smiled at her, his dark eyes gleaming like blueberries. The madness in them had not diminished, but whereas before it had advanced in a way that impeded Evan’s actions, Indigena thought this time he had control of it. Being away from Voldemort might have done that for him, she thought, and felt a brief longing to experience the same thing.

Then she shook it off, when Evan tired of holding up the Hufflepuff cup and made it vanish among his robes again, saying, “And you are worried about the Dark Lord sensing it? I thought you intended to lure me close and trap me for him.”

Indigena eyed him. “And you came *anyway*?”

“Of course,” said Evan. “You are interesting. There is only one more interesting person in the world, and he fails to pay me the attention I need. You are *talking* to me.”

Indigena decided not to question that. Even if Evan would tell her who the person was, without playing his riddle-games, it was not as though the answer *mattered* to her. “Well, that’s not the case.” At her casual gesture, the vines growing on the edges of the garden began to rise, wrapping them in a many-holed green cocoon. Evan looked at them but made no move to run, as Indigena had thought he probably would not. If she had grown the vines correctly, Indigena knew, they should bind any magic that tried to hear them here, including eavesdropping spells; they were a variant of the vines that bound wandless magic. “As I said in my note, I want your help to destroy Sylvan and Oaken Yaxley.”

“You must make it more interesting than that,” said Evan. “I do not help people, you should know that. I play with them.”

Indigena shrugged. “I was only speaking from my mind, and not yours.” Evan nodded as if that satisfied him. “Besides, I could do it on my own if I wished.” Indigena was confident of that. There was power in the earth that Sylvan and Oaken not only didn’t know about, but disdained. Given time, she could grow a plant that would separate the twins and make them vulnerable to attack. But they didn’t have the time, not when her Lord spent more and more time walking Sylvan and Oaken around the pattern of pounded blood and flesh while he explained matters to them. Indigena was fairly sure that they had only until Midwinter, in fact. “But I wanted to see how you would conquer them. If your play would include leaving them alive, or not doing what I would call help, then I have no interest in it.” She started to turn away.

“Wait.”

I think I am learning how to deal with him. Indigena turned with an arched eyebrow. “Yes?”

“You should never take for granted my answers,” said Evan. “They hide more profound truths than you can know.”

Riddle-talk. Not important. “Does this mean that you intend to play with them and break them, then?”

“Yes.” Evan’s eyes were bright. “Twins are the most delightful toys, don’t you agree? When I thought about it, I had a good laugh over the fact that you had me lure Connor Potter away from his brother. If you had let me play with him, I would have been content, but even what you allowed me to do was good sport.” He cocked his head, and a faint smile touched his mouth. “Perhaps I can use Connor Potter again someday, if only as a way to annoy Harry. Nothing annoys us like our siblings.”

That will not happen, Indigena thought, but thinking about why only led her into the tangled maze of her own allegiances again, following a man she was learning to despise and fighting a man she admired, so she abandoned it. “I can agree with that sentiment, at least,” she said, thinking of Lazuli and Peridot. “But in this case, it is these twins you should concentrate on playing with.”

“Interest me,” said Evan. “Interest me, and I am the most faithful game-player you will find. I once spent seven days at darts, because the darts were made out of thighbones.”

Indigena nodded, not doubting the intent behind the statement, no matter what the literal truth of it might be. “I do not think that you can get inside their shields in time.”

“What time?”

“Midwinter.”

Evan laughed. “*I thought* I had heard that wind blowing.”

Indigena shrugged. That could mean any number of things, including the windstorm, the wildstorm, that had surged above them in the graveyard when Indigena bound him with her thorns. “What matters to me is whether you can really destroy them inside two months.”

Evan gave a slow, contemplative nod. “I can. But now I must meditate on the method I shall use. Shhh.” He held up a hand at her, as if she might be prompted to interrupt, and sank into what looked like actual meditation. Indigena used the silent moments to test the temperament of the garden through the soil.

While she waited, she heard an immense sound rising from below, both snarl and scream, and the Dark Mark on her arm burned. Indigena sighed. *That means that he has lost Hawthorn Parkinson for good, then, and his attempts to regain control over her are in vain. He will be angry, and Merlin knows what he will demand to appease his temper.*

Evan, incredibly, didn’t seem bothered by it. He lifted his head a moment later, and he was smiling. “Yes,” he said. “I know. I know. But I am not to tell the knowing to anyone else. You must not question me.” He nodded to Indigena. “The game will be in motion by Midwinter. You, and me, and the twins, and a fifth player.”

Indigena narrowed her eyes. “Who?” she asked before she could stop herself.

Evan actually reached out and pinched her nose, then pulled his hand back. “That was for questioning me, when I told you not to,” he said sternly. “Now be quiet, and go follow your Lord. He’s calling for you. Perhaps he will demand that you play darts with him.” He turned and walked calmly out of the garden, Apparating when he was a sufficient distance away.

Indigena shook her head and followed the burn of her Mark, pondering, all the while, the fact that she should certainly have searched him for the Hufflepuff cup and tried to take it away from him, if she was as loyal a Death Eater as she usually acted.

But I did not act very loyal just then, did I?

She walked back into the stifling heat of the burrow, and knelt before her master in the freezing cold of his anger. She thought he might torture her, or order her to torture someone else, and hurt her when she refused.

It seemed, however, that her Lord was simply interested in a victory to replace the loss he had just suffered and salve the wound. “Prepare Feldspar,” he told her, his voice replete with hisses even when he spoke a word that had no sibilants. “Gather the reins

into your hands, and test the level of trust he has gained. *They* fall before *he* does. Do you understand, Indigena?"

"I do, my lord," said Indigena, since she actually knew this plan, unlike the one which would happen at Midwinter and involve the wild Dark, the pattern of flesh and blood, the twins, and, undoubtedly, Harry.

She had just risen to her feet when a whirl of wings startled her, and she lifted a thorn from her back to strike out at it. Then she realized it was only an owl, who landed on her shoulder and insistently held out a foot.

Indigena vaguely recognized the handwriting on the envelope, but it was not until she opened it and read the letter inside that she understood what it meant. Her lips tightened, and the tendrils under her skin rippled and jerked and wavered, which she knew always made her look strange to someone else.

"What is the matter?" her Lord demanded.

"Bad news from home, my Lord." Indigena crumpled the letter in her hand. "Another one of my cousins has joined Harry." *Damn Chalcedony.*

Harry had to admit he was curious as to why Lazuli had asked for a meeting. She had said that a cousin of hers wanted to join him, but she hadn't included any details about why in her letter, and she had not said why it had to be *now*. Frankly, Harry would have preferred to wait. Juggling classes, his constant venturing into Voldemort's mind, and preparations for the Halloween ritual as he was, he would have been better able to sustain the meeting in a week.

But it did have to be now, from the sound of it, so Harry had invited them both to Hogwarts and was now waiting for them in the Room of Requirement. Draco sat at the table in the center of the room, whistling under his breath and practicing hexes now and then. Harry studied his shadow, which stretched across the floor, and had to admit that it did look a bit longer. When they entered the Casting of Shadows ritual, the magic would be at full wax, but it showed itself in small signs before then.

Draco looked up and caught his eye, then grinned. "What time were they supposed to arrive?" he asked. "Do we have time for—"

A sharp rap on the door made him sit back, pouting. Harry stifled a laugh as he moved to answer it. Draco liked Harry's frantic busyness lately no more than he did, but at least he had different reasons for disliking it.

"On the ritual day, at least," he said gently, but saw Draco's eyes cloud over. Harry paused. "What's the matter?" He would have sworn that the Casting of Shadows didn't preclude them from having sex, but perhaps he had misread some detail in the ritual.

"I'd like having sex then," said Draco, and folded his arms. "*You* wouldn't."

Harry was about to ask what in the world he meant, but the knock on the door was repeated, sounding irritated this time. Making a mental note to ask Draco about it later, he opened it.

Lazuli stood there, her face pale and emotionless as usual. Beside her was someone shrouded in a cloak. Harry glanced at Lazuli, who said, "We were afraid that he would attract stares as we came through the school." She stepped through, with the figure following directly behind her, and Harry shut the door after them.

A vision of a deep green curve stopped him. He had to brace himself on the door for a moment, and took a deep breath. He was getting these glimpses of what Voldemort was thinking about more and more often, but he couldn't tell what they were, or why the Dark Lord would be so preoccupied with abstract images.

He turned around and saw that Lazuli had taken a seat at the table, but the other person had not. Instead, he said, in a voice that had an odd echo in it, "It is proper to meet you on my feet," and flung back the hood.

Harry blinked. The man facing him was as pale as the other Yaxleys Harry had met, but he didn't have their dark coloring in his hair. Instead, it was a pale blue-gray, and it hung into eyes that seemed the color of Draco's. Then the man turned his head to focus more fully on Harry, and small red spots of color flared in his gaze, like the flecks in bloodstone.

"Chalcedony Yaxley?" Harry asked. *He's well-named, at least.*

The man nodded. "May we sit?" The echo in his voice repeated sit a moment after he did.

“Of course.” Harry sat down on the far side of the table, studying the man. Perhaps it wasn’t so strange that Lazuli had asked for a meeting but given no details. Chalcedony had done powerful and very odd magic, to leave his eyes that color permanently. She might have been unable to explain what he had to offer to the war effort, and decided to bring him along and let him speak in his own words.

Chalcedony sat down carefully, and promptly began to tap his foot in a pattern of four beats, with one pause between them. He relaxed as he did it, and Harry wondered if it was a means of anchoring his mind, keeping it from drifting off.

That made Harry more curious, but also more concerned. Some kinds of magic *did* eat their practitioners alive, demanding their attention even when that attention should be engaged elsewhere. Harry would not want an ally who might fall asleep in the middle of a battle or a crucial meeting.

“That is better.” Chalcedony focused on Harry, never letting up on the foot-tapping. Harry could feel Draco’s growing irritation from the side, and put a hand on his arm to calm him, though he didn’t look away from Chalcedony, either. Eye contact might be important. “Now. I see patterns. And there is an immense pattern taking shape in the world right now. It is not good. It is a soul-pattern.”

Harry blinked. “I’m sorry, but that makes no sense,” he said, even as he thought of the curves and knots in Voldemort’s mind. “I’ve never heard of a soul-pattern. Are you similar to a Seer? They see souls—“

“And I see soul-patterns,” Chalcedony interrupted. “Souls are—they are *souls*. A soul-pattern is the *representation* of a soul. It is the difference between a bird and the painting of a bird.” The beat of his foot altered, from four beats with one pause between to five beats and two pauses in between.

Harry nodded. “I can accept that. But whose soul-pattern is it? And how would you go about sculpting one? And what would you use it for?”

“It is yours,” said Chalcedony. “This one is sculpted of rendered flesh and blood. And in this case, its main purpose is to get the wild Dark interested in your soul.”

“That still tells us *nothing*,” Draco observed, grinding his teeth as he leaned forward. “Who is doing this? And *will you please stop that tapping?*”

Harry frowned at Draco, even as Chalcedony said, “Voldemort is doing this. And I am sorry. I must have a pattern to anchor myself. Otherwise, the patterns I see everywhere and anywhere will absorb me and take my mind away. I have learned them, but they have learned me, too. They know I am here, and they ride me, and make me express them when I must.” He shook his left sleeve back from his hand. Harry blinked at the sight of three fingers which looked like worn-down stubs. “They made me draw once until I made a pattern of my own bone and flesh and blood,” Chalcedony said simply, and lowered his hand again. “There must be a pattern to ride, and better one I create than one I cannot control.”

Draco sat back, appearing appropriately stunned. Harry said, “Could you tell us, please, why Voldemort is doing this? And how you sensed the pattern in the first place?” He still understood nothing of the context that Chalcedony was explaining, though it did explain some things that had been bothering him, such as the abstract shapes in Voldemort’s mind and what he could possibly have done to anger the wild Dark. Perhaps he had done nothing at all. Perhaps, as Owen had suggested, it was something Voldemort had done.

“I will try,” said Chalcedony. “I am sorry. I am not good at explaining—context. Too many statements about the same subject joined together make a pattern of their own, you see, and it tries to learn me.” He closed his eyes for a moment, and then leaned forward, slapping his right hand on the table three times. Then he began to speak, without sitting up or looking at Harry again.

“Voldemort is doing this to interest the wild Dark,” said Chalcedony. “Entice it, let it know your soul. A soul-pattern is fascinating. A full sight of it destroys the person whose soul it is. The wild Dark is learning it, and with the sight of the soul-pattern, it is learning to like you, want you, be fascinated, crave to take your soul and have you as a possession.” He leaned forward to bang his head on the table several times, and then sighed, as if that banished a particular compelling pattern.

Harry shuddered, feeling his skin crawl. “But why doesn’t Voldemort just lure me close enough to see the soul-pattern and destroy me that way?” he asked.

Lazuli picked up the tale, while Chalcedony switched the pattern of his foot-tapping yet again. “This part I understand,” she said simply. “A soul-pattern annihilates the person who sees it completely, Harry. And he doesn’t want that. At best, he wants your magic, if he cannot have your allegiance. And at worst, destroying you like that might destroy him, since the two of you are so

connected.”

“How did he get my soul-pattern?”

Lazuli shook her head and glanced at her cousin again. “Such a thing—can be learned—in the mind,” Chalcedony said, clicking his teeth together between words. “Those who have used them in the *past* to *destroy* their enemies are mostly *Legilimens*.” He grinned with triumph when that was out. Harry supposed the irregular stresses had worked to defeat a pattern in his mind.

“I don’t suppose Harry can use this on Voldemort?” Draco’s voice had soared with hope.

Harry saw the hope sour when Chalcedony shook his head. “It can only be used on someone with a *whole soul*. Voldemort’s soul is not *whole*.” He paused and groaned then, half-closing his eyes. Harry wondered if emphasizing two words at the ends of sentences had been too much for him. “I do not know *how* to describe it,” he continued, after a panting moment, “but it is *split*. He cannot be *destroyed* that way.”

Harry nodded grimly. He saw Lazuli’s eyes narrow in suspicion, but he ignored that. He had not trusted everyone among his allies with the secret of the Horcruxes. The most many of them knew was that Voldemort had a number of objects which needed to be destroyed before they could destroy him. If Lazuli guessed the truth from this, however, Harry could hardly blame her.

“Will any sight of the soul-pattern destroy me?” he asked. “Even if I glimpsed it through the connection that he and I have?”

“Yes,” Chalcedony gasped, and then abruptly leaned back in his seat and screamed. Lazuli turned to tend him without comment. Harry shook his head, but turned willingly when Draco grasped his shoulders and pulled him. He had expected something like this as soon as he heard the truth from Chalcedony.

“Stop looking into Voldemort’s mind,” Draco snarled. “*Now*. Before you have a full sight of it.”

Harry held still for a moment, watching him. “Even though I’m also learning my own darkness, and that’s preparing me better for the Casting of Shadows?” he asked. “Even though we still don’t know what Voldemort really intends to do once he’s got the wild Dark interested in my soul?”

“*Now*.”

Harry nodded, and closed his eyes, drifting towards the connection that he’d started to open between his mind and Voldemort’s. It was actually a simple matter to cut it. No matter how much he’d learned about the darkness, he still knew the light, the world above the tar-like surface of his mind, better. He jerked back, and the dark water bubbled and screamed and let him go.

It tried to follow him, of course, to occupy his attention and demand a claim on it, but Harry shut the door firmly, crossed back over the fence and stepped back from the darkness. The creature inside it snarled at him, then rolled over and dived down beneath the black oil to brood in silence.

When Harry was sure he could find no trace of the connection left, he opened his eyes and looked at Lazuli. Chalcedony had passed out, and she was helping him to his feet, wrapping him again in the dark cloak. Harry supposed the cloak had been not only to keep people from gaping at him, but to reduce the visual stimuli he received, which could transform into patterns.

“Is there anything that can be done for him?” he asked.

Lazuli shook her head. “No. He is dying. He traveled too far into the patterns, and they are eating him alive. He came to you because he sensed this pattern taking form, and believed it was too evil to be allowed to endure. But now that he has done his duty, I fear that is the limit of service he will be able to offer to our side.” She wrapped a fold of the cloak around Chalcedony’s face, and then brushed a golden button on the side of the hood. Harry saw it wink and glow, then dissolve the strange Yaxley into the bright colors of a Portkey. Lazuli turned and faced him. “*I* may be able to do more,” she said.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Tell me.”

Indigena rolled her eyes as Feldspar vanished again. Honestly, she was not sure how he managed to fool Aurora Whitestag. He *must* be more convincing than he appeared here when he was in the Ministry.

Of course, he might behave better when he doesn’t have you there, terrifying him out of his wits.

Indigena ignored the thought. She wasn't in the mood to think anything charitable about her family today.

And she was even less so when a chorus of scents filled her nostrils. Mingled rose and lily—that meant someone was trying to enter the garden at Thornhall, her private sanctuary, the home where her most precious plants grew.

And, not incidentally, the place where she had buried the wand that contained a shard of her Lord's soul, when she had retrieved it from the orphanage after assassinating Scrimgeour.

She vanished at once, Apparating without a word; if she had lingered to tell her Lord where she was going, she might miss a moment when the intruders managed to pierce her wards. It was evident that she would have to have stronger protections for the garden. She had counted on the reputation of the plants and lack of knowledge about the Horcruxes to keep intruders out.

She landed in front of the gate, her thorns already out and lashing on her back. The group in front of her paused. Indigena recognized the young Malfoy and the traitor Severus Snape near the back, but it was the two figures in front that her eyes focused on. One was Harry, of course. He knew about the Horcruxes, and he would have come on any hunt for them.

The other was Lazuli.

Indigena lifted her head and her thorns both higher. "Oh, yes, come against me," she said. "If you want to die, that is." She swayed the tendrils back and forth, and looked for the best target. Snape would be easiest to reach, standing as he did in a gap between others, but she knew she should strike and kill the young Malfoy if she could. Tear out his heart, and Harry's heart would rupture with it.

Thoughts tried to intrude again, assaulting her with the differences between what she was and what she wished she could be—serving Voldemort as opposed to serving Harry. She dismissed it. Even if she changed allegiances, she knew they would never accept her. She had killed Scrimgeour, Percy Weasley, Harry's parents, and Pansy Parkinson, and she would still slay more of them, even now. They disdained her brand of honor. They knew nothing about the gestures she made that might have softened them towards her, such as setting the narcissus free and trying to destroy Sylvan and Oaken, and she would never tell them. She had done them because they were right, not because she wanted to make herself appear good to Harry.

"Move aside, Indigena," Lazuli said, stepping forward. "We know that you have a piece of the Dark Lord's soul buried here. I had wondered at the reason for your increase of wards around the garden. Now I know." She actually had the nerve to hold out a hand, as if she thought the sight of her chewed arm would sway her sister. "I know your heart. I know your version of honor. I know that you can come to us, still, and fight as viciously for us as you did for Voldemort."

Indigena snorted. "You know me less than you thought you did, sister, if you truly believe such a plea would sway me."

Harry moved up beside Lazuli, drawing her attention there in turn. "You know what the Horcruxes mean," he said. "You know that your Lord is attempting to live forever, and you *know* what he would do with that immortality. Can you honestly say that you want him to succeed?"

He is used to converting people with his voice alone. But Indigena was not blind. She could see the loathing in his eyes. He might accept her on his side if she groveled, but he would never accept her differences from his plans the way that her Lord did. Voldemort had listened to her when she refused to torture others simply to cause pain. Indigena thought Harry would not do the same thing, because he would believe that what he asked her to do was right, and that she should be willing to do anything to make up for her past crimes.

Indigena greatly admired Harry. He was a Lord more after her heart than the one she served. But she had no desire to become what she would become if she followed him—believing in ideals that carried her far from the earth, into worlds she had no business inhabiting. Had the Dark Lord not approached her, had the honor debt not been called, she would have remained neutral forever, taking no place and no part in the war. She had no natural commitments to the outside world, such as Lazuli's surety that her child deserved more justice or Chalcedony's conviction that some patterns were evil, which could drag her past her garden. And she would not join for the obscure reasons that Peridot had joined—but then, there was no understanding Peridot.

Harry would make her care too much. He would make her into someone Indigena did not want to be, and devoted to ideals that had too much to do with people she would never meet.

"You know nothing about what I want," she answered Harry, "or the world that I live in now."

Harry's eyes narrowed, and his magic began to grow and pulse around him. He would probably begin draining her in a moment,

Indigena knew. He seemed to have lost his scruples about draining enemies.

She was proud of him for that, in a way.

She was not proud of herself for feeling like that, though, because it was only another emotion, another thought, that made her world more complicated than it needed to be.

She turned and cast the spell she had already studied for such a moment on the garden entrance. Even if Harry drained her now, he could not stop the spell once flown, and he would not be able to enter the garden himself. The spell was an Unassailable Curse, meaning that only someone with a Dark Mark could go into the garden.

That done, Indigena faced her enemies again. Harry had backed off, wary of magic he didn't recognize. Well, he would be, wouldn't he, after Slytherin's shack? Snape was leveling his wand. The young Malfoy had his eyes closed, as if he would try to possess her.

Lazuli just stood there, gazing steadily at her, matching her look for look and breath for breath.

Indigena looked back, gave a nod, and then shot a thorn at the Malfoy boy. Swift as she was, Harry, of course, was swifter when forewarned, conjuring a serpent that swarmed up the end of her thorn and bit off. Indigena winced at the pain, but she had accomplished what she wished to: a distraction, and the crippling of the possession gift. Malfoy had stumbled backward, and was drawing his wand.

Indigena Apparated again. She would still know if they tried to have someone with a Dark Mark—Snape, perhaps—enter the garden, but she doubted they would be so stupid as to simply rush in. Without Harry's *absorbere* gift, they had no sure means of defending themselves from her children, and Indigena had armed her garden with weapon after weapon against such intrusions.

She landed back in the burrow, and explained the situation briefly to her Lord, who nodded in approval. Indigena herself could enter the garden at any time and retrieve the Horcrux if they decided on a better hiding place for it, but for the moment, there was no place so well-defended. And the Unassailable Curse was a good thing, forcibly separating Harry from his allies as it did. Indigena knew that Harry's presence at the destruction of the last Horcrux had been essential. Without him, his allies would have a much harder time destroying Ravenclaw's wand.

"You have done well, Indigena," her Lord praised her.

Part of her reveled in that.

Part of her despised herself for reveling.

Part of her wished for her Lord to die, even if it meant that she would have to die with him, which of course it would.

Indigena shook her head as she walked towards her garden. She had so few certainties anymore. Most of those she did were green and rooted in the earth.

Or running around the country with a golden cup, perhaps.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty: Face the Darkness

Snape regarded the potion with a dubious eye.

Oh, it *appeared* innocent, a flask of primarily green liquid, which sometimes shifted and eddied and took on a glint of blue from the fire in the hearth. But he knew as well as anyone that it was not. It was a formed and balanced poison, capable of traveling through the Dark Mark to destroy a Death Eater.

Currently, that might mean any Death Eater. Snape wanted to change the composition of the potion to insure that he and Peter—and now, it seemed, Lucius and Hawthorn Parkinson, though Snape felt less inclined to trust them—would not be affected. To do that, there had to be a test.

"Just *start*, Severus."

Snape turned and glared at the man who sat beside him. Regulus crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out, as if to prove that he was more childish than Snape. Then he rolled up his left sleeve and held out his arm. Snape stared in silence at the black Grim that rested there.

“You can test the poison on me,” Regulus urged. “I think Lady Death will protect me. She did say that I couldn’t die until she came for me.”

“And perhaps now and through the poison would be the means by which she decided to come for you,” said Snape. “Have you thought of that?” He didn’t add *you idiot* to the end of his sentence. He didn’t need to.

Regulus shrugged. His eyes were happier than they had been in a long time. They always were when he was conducting childish arguments, Snape thought spitefully. “If she really means to kill me, it’s inevitable, Severus. You could leave the poison alone, and then she would arrange to dump it on my head as I passed under it. Besides, I should be a useful control subject, shouldn’t I? I don’t have anything of Voldemort left in my arm, and you and Peter have less of him left there than the other Death Eaters. That means you can figure out the edges of his magic and learn how to tune the poison to only attack those who have a higher concentration of the Dark Lord in them.”

“You realize,” Snape murmured, even as he stood and retrieved the flask of poison from the shelf, “that you are speaking as if the Dark Lord were a burrowing parasite beneath the flesh, and not a Lord-level wizard?”

Regulus blinked innocently. “You mean he’s *not* a grub? The pale skin and the lack of eyes fooled me.”

Snape growled under his breath. Regulus *would* play like this, would attempt to bring humor into situations where it was not to be found. But what he said made sense. And while Snape could use both himself and Peter as willing test subjects, they were far likelier to die than Regulus was.

He picked up the flask of poison and looked carefully at the Grim on Regulus’s arm, then down at his shadow. That shape was currently curled up in sleep, however, and seemed unlikely to object.

Snape drew his wand, and cast the spell he’d developed to work with the poison. Of course they would not have the chance to track most of the Death Eaters and splash the poison on them; they must reach out from a distance to kill them. This spell would turn his own Dark Mark into a conduit to transfer the potion, once they were sure that it worked.

He hissed the words quietly, and watched the Dark Mark begin to glow blue, a light that the potion picked up. Then, concentrating on the idea of impurities in the mark on Regulus’s arm, traces of Voldemort, he carefully uncorked the flask and splashed a few drops on the Grim.

He felt the poison attack at once, sorting through the blackened flesh, chasing any traces of the Dark Lord—the caster of the Mark and the developer of the spell that created it. Snape was grateful, at this point in time, that Voldemort had insisted on being the one to Mark every Death Eater himself. If he had allowed his followers to do so, they would have had to figure out every single “lineage” of Marks and develop poisons that would annihilate each chain, back to the first person who had received the snake and skull from Voldemort himself.

Regulus made a pained grunt. Snape reached out and clasped his hand without taking his eyes from the Grim, or loosening his half-aware trance of the poison’s shifting and searching.

This was the most *self-aware* potion he had ever developed, without a doubt. It raced through the twists and curves of the Grim, now in the flanks, now in the hindquarters, and pulled him along. The rest of the world became dim. Now and then Regulus clasped his hand more tightly, and Snape squeezed back, but most of his mind was riding along on that strange journey. The poison could find nothing, though, the way that Regulus had said it would not be able to. Now and then it brushed up against the edges of a cold and dark power—Lady Death—but that was not what it had been trained to seek. It wanted what it had been trained to seek. It coiled sullenly in the middle of the Grim mark, and finally flushed back to the surface. Snape opened his eyes fully to see the blue-green liquid squeezing and pattering out of Regulus’s arm, useless now, soaking the floor as little more than a puddle the color of algae.

“Did you learn what you needed to know?” Regulus’s voice was slightly breathless.

Snape nodded. “The poison *will* seek traces of Voldemort,” he said, eyes slightly narrowed as he watched the puddle. “I did not know that it would bring me along so intensely for the ride. It means that I will be there when most of the Death Eaters are destroyed.” He considered the Yaxley twins and Indigena for a moment, then shrugged. It was unlikely the poison would kill them where a werewolf and blood curses had not managed. But if he could destroy the rest of the Death Eaters, he would count himself satisfied.

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Snape looked up and met Regulus’s eyes. “Peter, Hawthorn, Lucius, and I may be sick for a time—“ he could not help but think it was the least Lucius deserved “—but it is the others who will die. Thank you.”

Regulus gave him a strange, wistful smile, and stood. “I always like helping you when I can, Severus. Lunch?”

Snape nodded. There would be fewer students in the Great Hall now due to the time, and he had no class to teach after lunch today. He and Regulus could take their time and both speak and eat at leisure.

Regulus kept looking at him wistfully on the way to the Great Hall. Snape found that he had no idea why.

Hawthorn had pictured her first days of freedom—if she ever had them—as days of solitude and silence. She would spend time in the Garden, behind locked and warded doors. She would gaze out the window at the dragonsbane and pansies surrounding the hawthorn bush, the memorial to her family. She would renew the charms and remove the dust that would have accumulated in her home during her long absence. She would relearn, if slowly, the political landscape of Harry’s allies and friends.

She had never anticipated her first days back being a struggle against the Ministry, who were reluctant to accept that she had truly been under the Dark Lord’s control.

Harry had offered her what help he could, but Hawthorn had refused it unless and until she saw that she could not regain her property and money any other way. She *wanted* to achieve things on her own. For so long, her mind and her will and even her body had not been her own, and it had taken Harry to bring her back from her hatred to freedom. She wanted to do this herself.

When she arrived at the Garden and found Aurors there, she had leveled her wand at them and asked in a cold voice what they were doing. They had tried to dismantle the Parkinson wards on the house, she found, but they were too ancient to respond well to that; the most they’d done was gone dormant and stop stinging anyone who walked through the door. The moment they sensed her, they were up and surging again, surrounding her in lines of light and flowers, and the Aurors looked more worried about that than about her wand.

One of them did answer her, however, a witch in her twenties with a pug nose, bright blue eyes, and an expression of nervous defiance. “We—Minister Juniper seized the property of known Death Eaters under martial law. We can use the house as a headquarters for as long as we like.” She paused, and then, probably because she was in that temperament where daring and stupidity were the same thing, added, “And the Ministry has taken command of your funds, too.”

“I see,” said Hawthorn. The wards grew thicker at her back, and she knew they would listen to her, kill the Aurors if she told them to, but she did not wish to start her return to the wizarding world with murder. Humiliation would do.

“*Protego*,” she told the wards.

The Aurors looked confused, since they connected the word with the Shield Charm and not the special commands Hawthorn had bred into her wards. They were even *more* confused when the lines of light surged forward and surrounded them, snapping at them with the heavy teeth of sundews and Venus-flytraps.

The pug-nosed Auror was the first to howl and dash for the door, her robes flying behind her. The rest followed shortly after, especially as the wards nipped at their ankles and their bums. Hawthorn watched, smiling, as one who fell sustained bruise after bruise before he could stand and scramble out of the house.

The witch did pause halfway down the path to yell hoarsely, “This is still the Ministry’s house, and they will hear of this!”

“I’m looking forward to it,” said Hawthorn calmly, and shut the door, and turned to attend to the disarray both Aurors and months without her had put into the house. The wards danced smugly around her while she cleaned.

The next morning, of course, she had received a polite demand from the Ministry to come to them at once and explain what she was doing in her house. Hawthorn had complied, and taken some pleasure in showing her amber eyes and her teeth to the terrified young wizard who had to greet her. He kept stumbling, staring, and doubtless remembering that there was still one night of the full moon left, before he finally ushered her in to “see someone.”

That person turned out to be Aurora Whitestag, to Hawthorn's faint surprise. It seemed the Acting Minister's favorite hound was reduced to licking at the bootstraps of freed Death Eaters. In truth, Hawthorn couldn't say she was surprised when she thought about it. Aurora was undeclared, and Juniper favored the Light. He wouldn't keep someone without his own fanatical devotion in a position of true power for long.

Aurora sat behind a desk and frowned at her. Hawthorn smiled back, and thought about murmuring that she was hungry—which happened to be true—but decided not to, in the end. She doubted that Aurora would react as badly to that as the young wizard at the desk in the outer office had.

At last, Aurora cleared her throat and looked down at the papers in front of her. "You do realize that you can't legally own property as a werewolf or as a former Death Eater," she said. "And property and money taken under martial law are used for the good of England, which means that claiming you should have them and can put them to better use makes you a traitor to your country."

Hawthorn blinked a bit. Then she said, "I was not aware that a law had been passed forbidding werewolves to own property once again. I am sure another rebellion would have started if it had."

Aurora blushed and bit down on her lip, then looked at her notes. "It—it's a provisional measure," she said. "Temporary. Most werewolves who live in London now are biting Muggles, inducting them into their packs. That's breaking the International Statute of Secrecy. Until the Ministry can make sure that you aren't one of them, it can't allow you back into your home."

"I'm currently *in* my home," Hawthorn pointed out. "The wards recognized me, and Parkinsons have possessed the Garden for centuries."

"Yes, but you aren't *supposed* to be there." Aurora looked at her as if she thought this would carry some weight.

Hawthorn shrugged. "As little as I care for legal fights, I will wage them. I have returned from my slavery to Voldemort. I have never bitten a Muggle." *That I remember.* The nights she had run as a werewolf without Wolfsbane were sketchy in her memory, but she did not know if she could have distinguished Muggles from wizards in that state unless Voldemort told her to bite only a certain kind of person. And he had been far more interested, generally, in sending her after his enemies, those people Harry loved. "I have not violated the Statute of Secrecy."

"Yes, but the Ministry has to be *sure*, you see." Aurora rustled the papers in front of her.

Hawthorn watched her for a moment, then nodded. "I see," she said. "You know that you can't truly do anything about my possession of my home, but you want to threaten me into thinking you can. And you know that if I went to Gringotts and demanded the money from my vault, the goblins would oblige me, thus possibly opening a rift between the goblins and the Ministry that you really don't want or need at the moment. And you haven't moved against the packs in London because they own little property that you really want, and because you're frightened of them. I understand the true state of things perfectly." She leaned nearer and winked, ignoring the flinch that the other woman gave, as if trying to get away. "Don't worry. I won't spread that outside the office. It will be our secret."

"That is not the true state of things at all," said Aurora, who had flushed again, and looked as if she desperately wished she had stronger words, or stronger beliefs, to back her up. "You are a criminal if you remain in the Garden. It is an Auror safehouse."

"No, it's not. It's my home." Hawthorn arched an eyebrow and sat up. "And if you don't agree to stop sending Aurors at me, they will get bitten. Perhaps. Perhaps I might simply bury them in my garden and give them to my flowers to eat."

"Do not even joke about that!" Aurora slammed her hand into the middle of the desk, perhaps hoping to startle Hawthorn, or wound her, since werewolf ears were more sensitive to sudden noises. "Or you will remind people of Indigena Yaxley, who killed the Minister."

Hawthorn felt an upsurge of hatred and violence as she recalled the night of the assassination, the night she had become a slave again. But she quelled it. There were more important things in life. Harry had told her that, but he should never have had to tell her. She should have been able to work it out on her own.

"I don't care," she said. "My home and my money are my own, and I demand that you return them to me immediately, or I will cause a scandal that the Ministry cannot afford."

Aurora hissed under her breath. "Don't you see that this is the wrong way to go about things? The Acting Minister *will* fight you. He doesn't care for werewolves, or for Death Eaters."

Hawthorn shrugged and stood. “You are the one who has to make this decision,” she said. “You are the one dealing with me. Promise me my home and my money right now, and then the Ministry won’t have the outcry.”

Aurora closed her eyes, and looked slightly ill. Hawthorn watched her, and nodded slightly. She had smelled the wavering, the doubt, in the woman’s scent. She was remembering that she had her own allegiances, beyond those to the Ministry. Or perhaps she had already begun to distrust Juniper before Hawthorn entered the fray. Either way, this was up to Aurora Whitestag now, and not anyone else.

In a series of swift movements, Aurora seized what looked like the deed to the Garden, scrawled her name at the bottom, took up another sheaf of parchment, and signed again. Then she handed both in silence to Hawthorn, who took and studied them. One was, yes, the deed to the Garden, and the signature revoked Ministry possession of it. The other document ordered that Hawthorn have the money in her vault released to her, or an equivalent amount of money, if Galleons had already been taken out and used for something else.

Hawthorn nodded to her. “Thank you. See, that wasn’t so hard.”

Aurora sighed and ran a hand through her hair, but, in the end, shook her head. “Your problems aren’t mine, Mrs. Parkinson, and my problems aren’t yours,” she said quietly. “I’d appreciate it if you would leave now.”

That’s the truest thing anyone has said since I entered the Ministry. Hawthorn nodded to her again, and took her leave. The wizard behind the desk in the outer room shrank away from him as she stalked past him. Hawthorn looked once over her shoulder and gave a single, deep sniff, as if she were memorizing his scent for the hunt that night. He kept himself from fainting with fear, but, by the look of it, that was a near thing.

Only when she had left the Ministry entirely and was walking in Muggle London did Hawthorn take a moment to lean against a wall and take a deep breath, because only there could she be sure there weren’t Aurors and wards watching her.

She could collapse. She could give in to the remnants of slavery and hatred in her mind.

Or she could go on and live, the way she would have to. She had lost so much already. She could not let another loss cripple her.

She stood upright, shook her head, wrinkled her nose at the immense amount of rubbish in Muggle London, cast a Disillusionment Charm on herself, and Apparated home.

Draco opened his eyes slowly on the morning of Halloween. This ritual would begin the moment they woke, and continue until the moment they fell asleep. That meant his shadow should be extending across the floor by now.

It was.

Draco caught his breath. His shadow was the color of ink, sharply defined even against the green carpet of the Slytherin bedroom. It overlapped the edge of the bed, ran along the floor until it met the wall, overcame a good portion of the wall, and then flowed into the loo. He propped himself up on an elbow, and the shadow moved with him, but not as far as it should have.

Of course, it also shouldn’t have been cast that far by the low amount of light in the room, either. The Casting of Shadows was a means of embodying the Darkness in a courting pair; the size of the shadow referred to how much they had of traits like selfishness, greed, and the will to dominate others. It was Draco’s soul that shed this particular blackness, not his shoulders and arms.

And that had an effect on the way he reacted and thought about this day, of course. He was deeply pleased by the look of the shadow. He was what he *should* be. No one else should dare to try and change him. He would do anything for those people he cared for, but that number of people was extremely small. And he would demand what he wanted at the most inappropriate times and in the worst situations. He was a childish brat in many ways, but then, most of the people who would criticize him for that were not people he had to listen to.

Behind him, Harry gave a little sigh and stirred.

And the bedroom vanished in night.

Draco caught his breath in surprise before he realized what must have happened. Harry's shadow was so large and so black that it had swallowed his own; in fact, it extended across the bedroom like a swathe of night. He reached out and ran his hand through the blackness, smoothing his hand up and down. It felt cooler than he had expected, but it warmed up quickly, like flesh exposed to a snowstorm and then brought inside again.

A hand gripped his shoulder, and Harry's voice whispered, "Draco?"

"I'm here." Draco turned, groping his way through the night, and felt his elbow bump into Harry's shoulder. "Sorry," he said, and then he caught the edges of Harry's face and kissed him fiercely.

Harry gave as good as he got, leaning forward until Draco was pressed flat into the bed, biting and nipping as if he couldn't have enough. Draco had expected that to happen, and his pleasure grew.

A moment later, Harry drew back with a gasp. "What am I doing?" he whispered.

"This is the side that you normally keep caged coming out, Harry," Draco said calmly. "And that's the reason I said that I wouldn't mind having sex when we were in the middle of this ritual, but that you might not like it. I don't think you'll be able to hold yourself back from doing whatever you want with me. And I *like* that." He moved his legs up, clasping them around Harry's waist, and squeezed tightly.

Harry swallowed, and Draco could feel him fighting the impulse to grind back, press down, and bring them both to orgasm, and ignore the fact that they had classes today. "I suppose this is why the joined couple is considered irrevocably joined after this," he whispered. "They've seen things about each other that no one else ever will."

"Partly," said Draco. "Of course, this ritual was also designed to bring out obsessive and jealous qualities around each other, and until it was formalized as the point where no one could interfere, there were—well, incidents of one partner tearing someone apart whom they thought was eyeing the other one."

"*Draco.*"

He chuckled and reached up, this time making sure to cradle Harry's face gently. "You don't need to sound so distressed, Harry. I honestly don't think anyone will try to snog me, given your shadow and your presence. And I also think that you can control yourself from dispensing jealous violence. Just think about me instead." He arched his neck and kissed Harry once again. Harry made a low purring noise, like the rumble of some great cat, and returned the kiss with interest, once more.

And then the shadow dissipated, at least for Draco. Familiarity with it did let the partners see each other. He noticed at once that Harry's eyes had deepened in color, the way that they had when he was exploring the connection between Voldemort's mind and the pool of blackness in the bottom of his own thoughts. His expression was conflicted, twisting between passion and incredulity that he could feel that kind of passion.

Draco liked it. He thought that had been one thing Harry never understood about him: how he could be so unafraid of not only Harry's magic, but also his darkness.

The simple answer was that Draco was a Dark wizard, and he still could not imagine Harry hurting him, no matter which personality facet possessed him at the moment.

He kissed him one more time, lingeringly, and this time got the response he wanted, hard and demanding, the response that Harry was too afraid of himself to give most of the time. He clasped his legs around Harry's waist hard enough to wring a grunt out of him, and tried to roll them over so that he was on top.

Harry pushed back down instead, holding him still, and this time reached out with obvious intent to remove his pyjama top.

Draco sighed happily, at least until Harry started kissing him breathless again. They could be a little late for breakfast. No one who mattered would mind.

Harry knew what the ritual was supposed to do. Everything that he'd read and which Draco had told him about the purpose of it made sense. So he wasn't surprised to feel the emotions surging up in him.

He just—he'd never realized to what a large extent they were present in him, as long as he gave himself free rein to feel them.

Yes, his ability to control himself could account for some of it, and so could his fear of expressing emotions like this, but still, it was just much easier to think of himself as *not* jealous.

It wasn't that easy to realize that, after the first few moments in which their shadows had reduced people to stunned stares and whispers, he was watching anyone who looked at Draco for too long. Most of the stares probably weren't sexual. They were probably discussing how selfish he was, from the shape of his shadow, or how he could stand to be partnered to someone who, with a shadow like that, resembled the next Dark Lord.

But Harry didn't *like* it, anyway.

It was a stupid emotion, silly, primitive. It wasn't as though the school was filled with people dying to court either of them. It wasn't as though Draco, having been the one to initiate a ritual that lasted three years, would leave him to run off with the Hufflepuff girl who sighed dreamily after him as she left Transfiguration. And she was a fifth-year, anyway, so she was probably just entertaining innocent dreams.

He didn't like it anyway. He found himself with the strongest desire to hide Draco behind his back for the majority of the day, or shove him in a closet and make love to him until Draco forgot there was such a House as Hufflepuff. He growled at the girl, who started and scurried away when she saw him watching.

Draco, of course, was enjoying himself hugely. He didn't deliberately flirt with anyone else—he was rather occupied in watching people who stared after Harry and hissing at them—but he did sit back sometimes, and look at Harry with a smug smile, and revel in the close attention.

Do I not pay attention to him, normally?

Not this closely.

And Harry knew that, in one part of himself, but it was as though his normal mindset, for one day, had become a painting, and this kept-out part had surged forward to become the reality. He knew how he usually felt, but that didn't matter when he was watching Draco lick butter from his fingers and knew that Michael, across the room at the table where he ate with other refugees, was watching, too.

Harry wanted to slam Michael against the nearest wall and demand that he stop staring.

He went to Arithmancy with Draco bristling, on edge, his magic and his shadow both snapping around him like banners. Professor Vector did ask him to calm down so that the windows she opened to throw light into the classroom would actually be effective. Harry acknowledged her with a grunt and tried to concentrate on his equations, instead of the way he wanted to hunt Michael down or take Draco somewhere and shag him silly.

Draco sat next to him and innocently did equations of his own, which didn't help. His narrowed eyes at anyone who came near Harry were probably less noticeable than Harry's scowl.

That led Harry back into the pattern of thought about how he normally didn't look at Draco like he was the center of the universe. And that presented him with a nasty idea.

What if that means that someday, he does get fed up with not being important enough to me, and leave? What if he takes a lover who actually gives him the attention he deserves, and doesn't make him play second fiddle to a war?

The thought, once lodged, burned in his belly like a hot coal. And Harry finished Arithmancy with one desire firmly in mind. He waited until Draco had taken a step past the door in their usual direction, then grabbed his hand and pulled him in the opposite one. Their shadows paced them. Harry paused once to study them, and saw his shadow, snake-shaped, carrying Draco's dragon-shaped one in a bundle of writhing coils, tongue flickering hard and eyes maddened.

“Harry?”

“Here.” Harry threw open the door of the nearest room and raked it with his eyes. His sense of other people's magic had already told him it was empty, but he wanted to make *absolutely* sure. Other people didn't get to share what he was about to do with Draco.

“Harry—“

“Hush,” said Harry, and shut the door behind them, and shoved Draco up against the wall. Draco blinked at him, then shook his head.

“I haven’t been looking at anyone else,” he said, softly.

“I know that,” said Harry, and fell to his knees in front of him, undoing his trousers with hands that shook with eagerness and impatience. “I’m just making sure that you never do, either.”

Draco opened his mouth to retort, and then his eyes rolled and his head fell back against the wall. Harry knew why. He had not only drawn out Draco’s cock by then and fastened his mouth rather firmly around it, but he had done what he’d never dared before and brought his magic directly into play. A current of it was coursing through Draco’s skin where Harry’s hand rested on his groin, running like stinging, biting lightning through his balls and down to his cock.

“Harry! What is that—why did you never—“

Harry ignored him. For one thing, it wasn’t as though Draco couldn’t figure out the answer to that question if he searched for it. More to the point, he had more important things to do.

He sucked, hard, not with the gentleness that he’d always used before, and which he knew Draco deserved. He’d always been afraid—of losing control, of hurting Draco, of frightening him. Now he knew that he wasn’t going to hurt Draco, he couldn’t frighten him, and, well, what was the Casting of Shadows about but letting down barriers?

His magic gathered in his mouth. This time, Harry commanded it to ride his tongue, increasing the sensation, taking the pleasure that flowed out of Draco’s body and feeding it back, until Draco couldn’t only feel his cock getting sucked but also feel what Harry felt: the salty taste, the warm weight on his tongue, the way Harry had to work to keep his teeth wrapped back and away when he really wanted to use them.

“You can,” Draco whispered.

Harry glanced up at him, never stopping his task, and silently rejoiced. Draco’s eyes had gone so hazy that Harry doubted he could see far, and his hand trembled as he reached down to stroke Harry’s hair.

“Please,” Draco said. “A bit of using your teeth—is all right. I don’t—“ And he arched his back, unable to finish the sentence, as Harry curled another loop of pleasure through him.

So Harry used his teeth, just a bit, then used his tongue to soothe the hurt, and then sent the pleasure flowing forward again. This was more delicate work than he’d ever used it for. That didn’t matter. He knew his magic would do exactly what it was told.

And so would Draco.

Draco came hard, with a cry that rather made Harry hope people were passing up and down the hall, so that everyone could hear him. He swallowed what landed in his mouth and licked his lips equally hard, sitting back and catching Draco as he slid down the wall, then leaning close so that he could nuzzle his nose into his hair.

“I really, really want you,” he said.

Then he paused, wondering if he should say that he really, really *loved* him, instead. But Draco’s eyes were open, and he saw the doubt, and he reached up and dragged Harry’s head down to his, kissing him thoroughly. Harry knew what he was saying clearly. He could hear of love whenever he wanted to. He knew Harry loved him. He wasn’t as sure of Harry’s lust.

“Now,” said Draco, when he’d recovered a bit, “I want you to put up locking and silencing spells on the door, and fuck me properly.” He raised an eyebrow. “And, before you ask, yes, I know we’re going to miss Transfiguration. It’s worth it.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about that, to be honest,” Harry muttered, and reached down to pull Draco’s shirt off.

Draco’s voice was full of pure, if breathy, triumph.

“Good.”

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-One: Holding Their Own

“I don’t mean anything personal by it, Malfoy. I’m just saying that when Saturday comes, the Gryffindor team will make the Slytherin team wish they’d never heard of Quidditch. You don’t need to get into a snit about it.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Connor and Draco hadn’t stopped arguing about Quidditch ever since McGonagall had announced that the Gryffindor-Slytherin match would be held as normal. The wild Dark had taken no students since Amanda Bailey, and the Ministry had softened its pressure to close the school once they saw (and actually believed) that. Besides, the Headmistress believed they should continue to live as normal a life as possible, and to many students, Quidditch spoke “normal life” as nothing else could. There would be professors watching on the grounds, as well as students that Moody had trained and wizards and witches who had come for teaching but not departed for their home villages yet. Voldemort probably didn’t have enough Death Eaters to defeat that many people even if he sent them all, and he would be an idiot to risk them all in one place after the disaster of the Midsummer battle.

What really concerned Harry—though he wasn’t saying it aloud, because he didn’t want anyone else to think he was *dreadfully* worried—was that he wouldn’t be there.

Juniper had sent him a peremptory letter on the same day he’d finally informed McGonagall that the Wizengamot had decided the school could stay open. Apparently, the International Confederation of Warlocks had made a decision on the Statute of Secrecy. Harry was to hear the news in private, before it was announced to the British wizarding world at large. Juniper had called it “a gesture of reconciliation.” Harry had braced himself to hear that they’d determined every time he broke the Statute was a crime and that he should be locked up in Tullianum. He would refuse to submit to that, of course.

And then politics between Juniper and Harry would become—rather interesting.

But that visit was set for the Saturday of the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch game. Harry had fretted until Draco had reminded him just how many people would stand around the Pitch. He thought the greater danger would come from people trying to surreptitiously hex the players of the team they didn’t favor. And, in the end, Harry had to agree.

He had been more inclined to listen to Draco since the Casting of Shadows. He wondered if that was a bad thing or not. At least it wasn’t making him interfere in arguments about Quidditch.

“If Harry still played on the team, you’d lose, you know,” Draco said mutinously as they drew near the Great Hall. “Don’t even *pretend* that you don’t know that, Potter. He’s worth more than the whole Gryffindor lot of you.”

“Did he tell you that while you were still drunk from his shagging?” Connor muttered. “Or is this from fantasies about being squeezed between ‘Quidditch-toned thighs’—“

“I don’t want to hear *any* of this,” Harry declared, and pushed past them both to enter the Great Hall alone. He could feel the smoldering glares on his back. The one thing Connor and Draco seemed to agree on was that they both hated anyone who interrupted one of their arguments.

Harry sat down at the Slytherin table and regarded the head table for a moment. Snape gave a shallow nod of his head.

So. He’d perfected the poison that worked through the Dark Marks, then, or thought he had. Harry Transfigured an extra fork into a piece of sausage and used his own fork to eat it nervously. Snape had tested the potion thoroughly on himself and Peter, and even Hawthorn, who had agreed to it, rather surprising Harry. Lucius had watched them with disdainful eyes when they asked and refused to submit himself to it, at least until Draco had a quiet but violent talk with him.

They might be able to poison most of Voldemort’s Death Eaters this weekend, in fact.

Harry swallowed his food without tasting it. He knew that this was one of the few offensive strikes they could make in the war—so far, they’d found no way around the curse on the Sword of Gryffindor, their probes at Indigena’s garden had revealed more than a hundred different varieties of plant, and there was no way to call up Evan Rosier on command—but it still struck him as risky. He preferred all-out defensive war.

Or maybe I only think that because Snape might not wait until I’m back to use the poison.

Harry shook his head and resolutely attended to breakfast. He could hardly watch *every* single thing that happened around him and guide it personally. That interfered with the free will of others, in the end. He would go to his meeting with Juniper like a

good little diplomat—taking his sworn companions with him, of course, in case Juniper “accidentally” tried to trap him in the Ministry—and trust the others to take care of themselves.

Connor grinned fiercely as he strode out onto the Quidditch Pitch. He could feel the excitement hovering in the air around him, and howling through his body, skimming like a wind along the ribs.

They were going to *win*.

He felt a sharp satisfaction and joined power that he only felt when he was in proximity to the other members of the Quidditch team. He turned, skimming his eyes over them, and was rewarded with steady nods from their Beaters and Chasers. Ron caught his eye and bared his teeth in what could only be considered a smile because he probably didn’t mean it as a snarl.

Connor waved his arm to him, and then turned and focused on the middle of the field ahead, where Madam Hooch stood with the balls beside her and her own leg swung over a broom, her expression stern and forbidding.

Memories of other games tried to intrude: the absolutely magnificent one that they’d played last year, for example, acting and reacting around the balls like one being, or rolling and dodging and curving in an attempt to catch the Snitch from Harry in fifth year, at which he’d failed as usual. Connor pushed them away. What really mattered was the game in front of him, and the win they would have—they *would* have it, he was certain—and how he would fly, not how he had flown.

The Slytherin team lined up on the other side of Madam Hooch. Connor sneered at them. He could do that. The Slytherins were no longer his enemies because of House affiliation, or because he believed the lies that Sirius had told him. They were enemies simply because they were really *bad* Quidditch players. They had let themselves become too dependent on Harry’s skill as Seeker, and then they’d scrambled to fill the holes last year when he didn’t play. And now they were still scrambling, since their best Beater last year had left Hogwarts.

They know they’re going to lose, Connor thought, seeing the gnawed lips and the anxiously darting eyes. *They can’t win unless some disaster happens, and they know it.*

He waited patiently as Madam Hooch gave the usual speech that never prevented the Slytherins from cheating anyway, and then Ron and the Slytherin captain shook hands. They were apparently attempting to crush each other’s wrists. Madam Hooch cleared her throat pointedly at last, and they let go of each other.

And then the moment came. Connor felt excitement rearing up in him like a wild horse, and crouched a little over his Firebolt.

The whistle.

The balls flying.

And the teams unfolding, opening outwards like a rose, Connor flying precisely where he was supposed to go, and knowing that Ron and the others were going where they were supposed to.

This was going to be one of the good ones, he could tell almost at once. The team danced behind him like a swarm of bees, thinking and doing one thing. The Slytherin Seeker, meanwhile, flew high to look for the Snitch and almost collided with one of his Chasers, who were trying—unsuccessfully—to get the Quaffle away from Gryffindor.

Right on cue, an enormous banner unfolded from the Gryffindor seats, and the roar of a lion rolled out over the stands, not drowned by the enthusiastic hissing from the Slytherin seats. Connor grinned. Parvati had been to enchant the lion’s roar, even if Dean had drawn it.

And then he began to look for the Snitch. The first rule was to start in the opposite direction from the one where the Slytherin Seeker was looking.

Harry entered the Ministry in resignation. He had four sworn companions with him, but that wasn’t the true source of the stares. Everyone would recognize him now; the newspapers had been running enough photographs lately, as they reported on the attacks of the wild Dark at Hogwarts and suggested that Harry couldn’t do anything about it.

That was true, actually. Harry was only surprised that they seemed to consider it news.

The ride to the Minister's office was silent. Aurors had appeared to accompany them before they crossed the Atrium, and they didn't bother to conceal their tight grips on their wands and their suspicious glares. Harry didn't mind that much, but he had to think determined, glacial thoughts in order to calm the agitation of his companions. Even Syrinx looked as if she expected an attack any moment.

The corridor outside the Minister's office was crowded with yet more Aurors, to the point where Harry wondered if any of them were doing anything else. He still kept his face blank, though, and thanked his childhood training. By the time they reached the office door, he had taken to keeping one hand on Owen's side, low, where it wouldn't be seen. Owen's breathing had at least eased, and Bill and Charlie seemed content to stare hard into faces and memorize appearances for later.

"Enter," said Juniper's voice when one of the Aurors escorting them knocked.

They stepped inside, and Harry nodded. "Acting Minister," he said, wanting to make it clear on what basis he'd approached the other man immediately.

Juniper looked up from behind his desk. His face was more care-worn than Harry had thought it would be. Of course, it would help if he had grown that concerned over important things, instead of assuming that the Muggles were a greater threat than Voldemort, Harry thought.

He did his best to chain his temper. The Casting of Shadows had taught him even more than he'd wanted to know about his own darkness. He *could* get angry and destroy Juniper in a glorious burst of temper. That didn't mean it was a good idea.

"Harry," said Juniper, carefully emphasizing the lack of a title. "You were told to come alone."

Harry snorted. "Did you truly think I'd obey that order, Acting Minister?" He took another step forward, and then halted as the Aurors drew together enough to almost obscure his view of Juniper, bristling. Harry studied them coldly. None of them were truly powerful, nowhere near Snape's or even Henrietta's strength. Admittedly, that kind of magical power was rare, but it only made it all the sillier for them to oppose him. His magic stirred. He could destroy them.

"This news is only for your ears," Juniper said, as if he imagined that could cut ice with Harry. Harry didn't think he believed it any more, though. He probably thought he had to follow the forms. *He shouldn't. It only wastes time and energy—my time, his energy.*

"Then send the Aurors away."

Juniper leaned forward, looking rather ridiculous peering over the shoulder of an Auror, and fastened his gaze on Harry. Harry stared back, bored. As important as the news might be, the way Juniper presented it deeply diminished his enthusiasm for hearing it.

"That will not happen," said Juniper.

"And neither will the departure of my sworn companions." Harry's arms itched with the need to fold them, but he refused to express impatience and disdain so openly through his body language. "What is the news that you have for me, *Acting Minister*? What did the International Confederation of Warlocks decide?"

Juniper sat still for a long moment. Then he cleared his throat and reached for a thick scroll of creamy parchment on one side of the desk. His hand shook. Harry thought the emotion that it made it shake anger. He shrugged, but inwardly felt a small blurt of satisfaction. Perhaps Juniper would finally see that insisting on standard, traditional forms of respect wasted his time.

"They have decided," said Juniper, holding up the scroll so that Harry could see the official, globe-shaped seal on the outside, "that you have broken the International Statute in the past to defend Muggles and wizards against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Such breaches were deemed acceptable because the Ministry's Obliviators managed to contain them." He spat the last words like acid.

Harry gave him a sweet smile.

"On the other hand," Juniper said, and he smiled in turn, "they have also declared that another breach, now that you have attained adult status and are legally responsible for your actions, will be immediate cause for imprisonment in Tullianum. You may still continue your training there, and the Ministry will bring you out for the final battle with the Dark, but you would have no freedom

and no other rights.” He flung the scroll across the desk like a challenge.

Harry picked it up and read it carefully. Yes, the language was formal and archaic, but Juniper was telling the truth about what it said. Harry laid it back on the desk and pushed it towards Juniper. The Acting Minister stared expectantly at him.

“I don’t accept it,” said Harry.

The Aurors gasped as one. Harry wondered whether they had fainted when Juniper asked them to deal with the aftermath of Voldemort’s poisoned rain in Cornwall.

“You *must*,” said Juniper. “This is not based on personal dislike anymore, nor the whims of an overindulged little boy. You must obey international law, Harry, or the Confederation has the power to raise sanctions against Britain, including denying British wizards the right to travel to other countries.”

“I notice that France, Portugal, and Spain all abstained from condemning my actions,” said Harry.

Juniper frowned. “Rather. But, of course, those Ministers are in your robe pocket.”

Harry snorted. “Wanting to help the British Isles does not equal obeying me, Acting Minister. And I mean this. If it comes to a choice between saving people and preserving the International Statute of Secrecy, then I will choose to preserve lives. And if, after that, you try to imprison me in Tullianum, I will rebel again.”

“It will mean that our people suffer—“

Harry couldn’t help it; he snarled, and his magic touched his shoulder with a serpent. Juniper shut up, his eyes fastened warily on the snake-shaped patch of air. “Our people are *already* suffering,” Harry snapped. “From fear, from want, from the certainty that some of their numbers are turning to Dark Arts and becoming Death Eaters, since they have no other choice under that *stupid* law you created, unless they wish to come to me. We are fighting a war, and of course it must be a civil war at the same time. They’re longing for a true leader, and you won’t give them one. Don’t talk to me about suffering, Acting Minister Juniper. I have not seen you take one action that I would credit to the true desire to stop Voldemort, rather than preserve your own political power.”

He both felt and heard Owen growling agreement at his side. Harry watched Juniper with narrow eyes, taking in his shocked face, waiting to see what would happen next.

What happened next was that all the lights went out.

Draco snorted. Much as he hated to admit it, the Slytherin team was just as awful as Connor had claimed it was. The Seeker alternated between wild staring about and following the figure of Connor on his broom. The Keeper hovered uncertainly, and now and then darted towards the Quaffle, which usually enabled the Gryffindor Chasers to handily toss the ball past him. The Beaters hit the Bludgers into empty air. And the Slytherin Chasers—that they’d been put on the team at all was simply embarrassing.

Meanwhile, of course, the Gryffindor team didn’t just look good in comparison, but actually *was* good, to the point of flying in patterns that Draco could admit were beautiful, even through his haze of rage.

He shook his head at last and stood, walking out of the Slytherin stands. A few heads turned to watch him, but most people still leaned towards the game, hissing at the Gryffindors and screaming at the Seeker as if they could somehow make the difference between an inferior team and a superior one.

Draco reached the bottom of the stands and leaned his head against one of the supports for a moment, closing his eyes. How in the world was he supposed to be proud of his House when they had a team like *that*? Slytherin House shouldn’t have only two students to be proud of. He and Harry would leave the school after this year. What would that mean to the Slytherins left behind?

He sighed and turned away, walking towards the edge of the Pitch. At least, if he didn’t want to watch the game, he could take over sentry duty. A refugee wizard stood at the edge of the Pitch opposite him, leaning forward with an anxious expression as he scanned the Forbidden Forest. He twitched at every shout from the Quidditch game behind him, though, and Draco knew which way he’d prefer to be facing. Well, proper training would do better than mere earnestness, anyway.

“Here, go watch the game,” he ordered. “I’ll take your place. I don’t doubt it’s what you want.”

The man turned sharply to face him, probably startled by his silent approach. Draco found himself facing a wizard with large, almost bronze eyes, and dark hair. That in itself wasn't so unusual.

The shimmer around him, another face and body slowly melting into the place of his own, was.

Draco had seen them only once, but he recognized the Yaxley twins. And all his training hadn't been for nothing. He didn't resort to spells that he knew would only bounce from them—if a werewolf's teeth couldn't harm them, almost nothing would—but raised his wand and sent up a bright flare of blue sparks, the agreed-upon danger signal for Moody's wizards.

Nor did he waste time wondering what had happened to the wizard who used to stand sentry duty here. He could see small flecks of blood on the Yaxley twin's hands, and he could guess.

He charged forward instead, meeting those bronze eyes and leaping straight into their paired minds, intent on possessing them. He had no doubt they would be hard to handle, well-trained as they were.

But—well, so was he.

Harry heard the distinctive snarl of the wild Dark in the next moment, and doubted that this was a coincidence. He flung out his hand—the right hand, the one he still had trouble using—and ignored the trampling around him, the screams, and Owen's attempt to move him.

If what Chalcedony Yaxley had said was true, the wild Dark had come hunting *him*. It wanted his soul, that distinctive pattern. Merlin knew why, or how Voldemort had managed to interest it so much with Harry's soul-pattern, or what it would actually use a human soul for, but there it was. It had struck where he was, and even stopped taking first-years after only two attacks. Harry thought this appearance had more to do with his presence in the Ministry than any irritation with Juniper.

"Here I am," he called.

The snarl halted. Then an immense, heavy presence alighted softly beside him, like the sound of a jaguar's footfall, and Harry felt jaws open and close gently around his head.

He knew they could crush him. He held still nonetheless. The Dark was not at its time of greatest power yet. That would be Midwinter. And he didn't think it would take him now. Two years ago, it could easily have destroyed him before Midwinter. But it had waited for that time instead, wanting the full might of its magic behind it. The wild Dark was rather like Voldemort, sometimes.

Harry was well-aware that he was trying to make generalizations and guesses about the behavior of a completely unpredictable, inhuman entity. But given that he had no other means of proceeding, he might as well act as if what he believed were true, until he received definitive proof that it was not.

The teeth sank further into his skull. Harry fancied he could actually feel the buckling of bone, the moment when his skull started to give way under the pressure of those fangs.

He waited until that moment, and then he began to sing.

The wild Dark jolted, which made Harry gasp as shocks of pain rang through him from the teeth. But he ignored it, and continued to sing, pushing the phoenix voice through his throat and the blue flame from his hands. He had acquired this gift during his last major battle with the wild Dark. There was at least the chance that the wild Dark would be fascinated with it.

The wavering light of the blue flame, strangely sharp in that absolute darkness, revealed the monster that had hold of him. A manicomore. That made Harry breathe a little more easily. If the wild Dark wore the same form in which it had come to him on the walls of Hogwarts, then perhaps it was being consistent enough that he could intrigue it with this.

"Do you know what this is?" Harry whispered. "The voice of the phoenix who died to defeat you."

The wild Dark growled, a little, and made his head ring again. But it didn't hurt him, instead just staring at the blue flame with wide, and, yes, fascinated eyes.

"The second anniversary of that gift is coming on Midwinter," Harry whispered. "It will be especially powerful then, especially

significant. But to kill me before then—well, it would rather undo the power and significance, don't you think?"

The wild Dark gave another growl. Harry thought it was considering his offer, but that didn't mean he knew what it would decide.

Snape was prepared when the flare of blue sparks arose. No, he had not expected the Death Eaters to attack today, or he would have insisted that Minerva cancel the Quidditch game. No amount of "normality" was worth having children outside with Death Eaters.

On the other hand, he always expected the worst. So that made him better-suited than most to answering the signal. While others still gaped and screamed and scrambled, he was on his feet and on his way out of the Slytherin stands. Regulus trotted to keep up with him, and on the other side of the Pitch, he could see a flurry of motion that was almost certainly Peter.

At least this is an excuse to prevent me from having to watch my House lose in the most absurd fashion. They really had been too spoiled by Harry's presence on the team.

Snape reached into his pocket as he ran, drawing out the flask of blue-green poison. He waited until he reached a relatively sheltered area, just behind a lone tree near the Pitch, and he could see the targets.

Draco, and a whirling, cycling, blurry figure that was likely the Yaxley twins.

Snape grimaced—he was almost sure that his poison would not destroy any Yaxley—but even if other Death Eaters were not here, distance should not be an obstacle. He drew back his left sleeve and uncorked the flask.

Regulus, the idiot, paused to hover over him, while Peter started to move past him towards Draco and the twins. Snape snarled at them both. "Peter is going to be incapacitated in a moment," he told Regulus bluntly. "Bring him back here, and go after Draco yourself."

"But—" Regulus was looking at him as if *he* should need some protection.

"I am not a student, and I am not your brother." Peter, Snape was relieved to see, not being an idiot, had heard him and come back, crouching down beside Snape to take his arm as he held up the poison. "I do not need your protection. Go to one who does."

Regulus stayed a moment longer, staring into his eyes. Snape held the steady gaze as he poured the potion over his Mark.

Immediately, he felt the poison dive, and start burrowing through his arm, looking for evidence of the Dark Lord. He barely managed to take his wand in his right hand and cast the proper spell that would use the Mark as a conduit to the Marks of other Death Eaters. Then he bent double with both the pain and the dizzying impressions of the journey.

He was content to hear Regulus's footsteps pounding towards the Yaxley twins. *At least he overcame his bout of sudden idiocy.*

Harry began another song when he felt the teeth careening inward, this time one of pure triumph and joy. The wild Dark paused at the sound of it, and then Harry felt it quiver—this time, a motion that did not transfer itself to him—like a struck bell.

And then it was gone, and the darkness lifted, and Harry could see the office and the Aurors, all crowded near the far wall, and Juniper, frozen behind the desk, again. At least, he could see them over the shoulders of Owen and Syrinx and between the bodies of Bill and Charlie, all of whom had gathered very tightly around him.

"You're bleeding," said Juniper, breaking the silence and winning Harry's internal award for the most inane comment that a situation like this would ever need.

Harry snorted and raised a hand to trace his skull. Yes, there were rather a lot of bleeding wounds along his scalp and the edges of his face, some of them quite deep. He shrugged. He would live.

"I hope that you can at least see why I won't go to Tullianum," he said. "I have more important problems to worry about, Acting Minister. The wild Dark is one of them, since it's allied with Voldemort."

Juniper's eyes narrowed slightly. "That's impossible. The wild Dark serves no mortal wizard."

“No, but he can entice it.” Harry found that he was a little dizzy, which annoyed him. He shouldn’t be dizzy, not right now. He yawned, and then leaned against Owen’s shoulder so that he didn’t fall down. “And that’s what he’s done, and that’s what I’m dealing with. I don’t have *time* for Tullianum.”

Juniper looked as though he couldn’t countenance that. Harry didn’t know why. The world was rather dark and blurry and warm, and it seemed so easy to follow the sliding of the warmth into sleep. He felt Owen’s arm come around him to catch him and stop him from falling to the floor, so *that* was all right.

Indigena came in reluctantly on the Gryffindor side of the Pitch. For one thing, she thought it stupid of her Lord to send only four Death Eaters, even if three of them were his strongest.

For another, she’d been ordered to watch over Feldspar.

Her nephew looked worse than ever. Long nights of torture, and long days of infiltrating the Ministry and making Aurora Whitestag believe him, were taking their toll. Every few steps he stopped to take a breath and then cough out blood. Indigena closed her eyes in silent disgust.

All Feldspar would have had to do to avoid torture was present a brave mask around their Lord. Yes, he would still have had the hard task of the Ministry, and he would still have had to watch his words, but his tasks were no harder than many Indigena had accomplished, and easier than nursing her wounded Lord back to life. And watching their words was something they all did.

Instead, Feldspar let his eyes roll at inopportune times, and whinged about going to the Ministry when their Lord was already maddened over losing Hawthorn. It was simply infuriating that Feldspar wouldn’t realize his cowardly behavior couldn’t win him any favors here.

Now he sagged forward with a little sigh as they came up behind the Gryffindor stands. “I’m tired,” he whispered.

Indigena stifled a deep flare of irritation. And then she looked up and saw Connor Potter sweep overhead on his broom, abandoning the Quidditch game, and an idea came to her so suddenly that she could only blink for a moment.

She seized Feldspar’s arm and shook him. “Stand up and fight,” she hissed into his ear. “Do you know what our Lord will do to you if you don’t? We came here to take hostages. So *take* them.” She gave him a violent shove forward. He uttered another sigh, but dragged himself to his feet.

And then he saw Connor, and lifted his wand.

“Not that one,” said Indigena, drawing her own wand. “Our Lord doesn’t want him harmed.” Connor had seen them and was circling in low. Indigena was grateful for the stubborn courage that, difficult though it made protecting Connor sometimes, would draw him close when needed. “Choose someone else. I’ll take him, but he has to be handled carefully, and you aren’t capable of that.” She made a vague circling motion which Feldspar could take as the beginning of a binding spell, if he wanted.

He did, and, as Indigena had hoped would happen, the pride he had hidden behind the cowardice flared up. He had not believed that the honor debt would ever matter, and then, when Voldemort had taken Indigena, he had not believed his reckoning would ever come. He believed the world owed him things, and he reacted to any misfortune with indignation, when he wasn’t reacting to it with fear. He pushed at her arm, knocking her wand aside, and shook his head.

“No,” he snarled. “If he’s that important to our Lord, I’m taking him myself.”

“Feldspar.” Indigena let true alarm enter her voice. “Don’t—“

But he’d already turned and aimed his wand at Connor, who was now lying on his broom and probably about to try his compulsion.

Indigena aimed her wand at his back immediately. She had the perfect excuse for destroying her troublesome nephew now. Her Lord did *not* want Connor Potter harmed. That was very important. Indigena would become a little “enthusiastic” in her hatred for Feldspar and her desire to protect Harry’s brother, and Voldemort would accept the loss in return for keeping said brother alive.

Instead, though, Feldspar collapsed before any spell of hers could touch him, screaming and clutching his left arm, and writhing

on the ground. Indigena stared at him, then stared at her own left arm. Come to think of it, she had felt a spark of pain there, but it had faded at once.

She pulled Feldspar's robe away from his arm, and shook her head at what she saw. For some reason, the Mark had dissolved into a pile of blue-green goo.

Indigena blinked a few times. *They found a weapon against the Mark? They must have. And it can't hurt me—probably because it works with a human structure of flesh and blood and magic, and I am hardly human anymore.*

Of course, if it had hit Feldspar, it might have hit other Death Eaters. Her Lord would be watching his followers fall about him, and not know what had happened. He would be alone, unless the weapon could not hurt the twins and they had already Apparated back to him. Someone had to take him the news, describe what had happened, and protect him from his enemies just in case this meant Harry had found the burrow.

Yes. Of course someone did.

The fact that it got her away from the battlefield without having to hurt anyone else made a sweet taste fill her mouth, but that, Indigena decided, could stay between her and her honor.

Just as several people made themselves annoying by trying to fire curses at her, Indigena Apparated home to comfort her poor defenseless Lord.

Draco found himself charging straight forward, skimming down a tunnel so slippery with defenses that he almost slid out the other side before he could stop himself. He coiled back and turned to face the body that waited on the other side of the twin who stood in their world. If he could control that second body, perhaps he could make it return earlier and replace the bronze-eyed one.

The mind was watching for him, though, sensitive to the presence of anyone in him who wasn't his twin, and he rose in battle.

Draco found himself assaulted with images of blood and sacrifice. The twins tore off faces like masks. They bent and fed from the opened stomachs of their victims, then drew out the scraps of flesh and braided necklaces that they hung around their throats with murmurs of various incantations. They raped without much passion, more interested in what they could gain from the act—the victim's horror and rage made a strong component in several spells that could further extend and preserve their joined lives, and keep open the gate to another world—than in the satisfaction of sex. They knew lives of lightless knowledge, which to them was joy, but which would make most other people run screaming from them.

Draco did not run screaming. He had seen awful things in his years with Harry. And these were only pictures of acts that were past and could not hurt him. The twins' images of sacrifice did not compare to the reality of a basilisk about to bite him, for one thing. He continued pressing forward, sinking himself into limbs and flesh, dodging past the grasping claws of the twin—Sylvan—which always stabbed behind him and then behind him again.

Seeing that would not work, Sylvan used the images of what they would do with *Draco's* body once they had it. They would rape him. They would shred him. They would abduct him into the world where their second body waited, and he would go mad from the sight of what was found there.

Draco might again have managed to ignore those, but the images of rape were too much.

They couldn't interfere in a joining ritual like that. He and Harry had passed the Casting of Shadows. They belonged to each other, and no one should dare to interfere, even if it was only in a joke or an image that was designed to scare him away from a specific action.

He drove forward, screaming in pure rage, and Sylvan retreated in front of him, unnerved. He called to his brother, and Oaken replaced him, ducking into the world beyond the gate, while Sylvan and Draco burst back into the wizarding world.

That gave Draco more impetus to seize control of the body and manipulate it like a puppet, not less. He was closer to his body now, and he knew that Sylvan would hurt him if he could. When he could feel the limbs surrendering to him, he set out to break the connections that bound the twins together, shouting out incantations backwards, making Sylvan draw his wand and pass it through the air in motions that would undo the effects of some of their sacrifices, and controlling the impulses to Apparate away or hurt Draco's body.

Then the scene changed into the swirling milky nothingness of the other world, and Draco realized that Oaken must have switched them out again, pushing Sylvan's useless body back into the second space while he hunted Draco.

Draco smoothly gave Sylvan the command to Apparate to Voldemort, and drag Oaken with him, while *he* jumped out of both minds and hurried back along the sleek tunnel to his own body. It was too bad that he couldn't give them the command to be sick all over Voldemort's boots, but there were limits.

He opened his eyes in time to see the terror and rage on Oaken's face before he vanished. He clucked his tongue. *Just because they never had anyone start to undo their spells before doesn't mean that it wouldn't happen someday. They should have been prepared.*

A flash of gold traveled past him, and Draco snatched it out of the air before he could reconsider. Then he felt the fluttering of tiny wings, and knew it was the Snitch.

Laughing, he turned to consider the Quidditch Pitch. Though people milled every where, and the professors were herding students back to the school as fast as they could, he could see no casualties other than the one wizard the Yaxley twins had slain. Voldemort had sent his most powerful servants, sure that they could not be defeated, and look where it got him.

"Good work," Regulus Black's voice said from behind him.

Draco turned and nodded to him in a familiar fashion. "Cousin. Thank you. Is anyone wounded?"

Regulus shook his head. "Not that I can see. Of course, Severus was trying to poison the Death Eaters, and I don't know if that worked." He looked anxiously over his shoulder towards the Slytherin stands, and Draco smiled to see Snape standing, with his arm around Peter's shoulders, and giving Regulus a look that clearly said he had been an idiot to worry. "I don't think there were that many Death Eaters here," Regulus continued. "Or else the poison *did* work, and they all died before they could attack."

Draco nodded, and held up the Snitch between his fingers, careful to hold it fast so it didn't escape. "Shall we see if we can get Slytherin credit for winning the Quidditch game?"

Regulus gave him a kind look. "We were behind by so much that one hundred and fifty points wouldn't matter."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Right. I forgot." He tossed his hand open, and let the Snitch fly away again. Then he began walking the edge of the Pitch, trying to see if his impression was true and only one person had died.

His heartbeat quickened when he saw the small group of people helping someone up the Hogsmeade road, and more when he realized the group was Harry's sworn companions. He ran towards them, and Owen, who was floating Harry behind him with a Levitating Charm, nodded to him.

"The wild Dark attacked him," he said, and sighed. "He fainted from blood loss, but we thought we should bring him back to Hogwarts instead of trusting St. Mungo's." Then he eyed Draco, and his expression changed. "What happened to you?"

"I'll tell you later," Draco murmured, his eyes locked on the sleeping Harry. Holes around the sides of his scalp and face, looking like fang marks. He kept from shaking his head and rolling his eyes. *We both held our own, it looks like. We can be grateful for that much.* He finally managed to satisfy himself that the wounds were minor, and looked back at Owen with a faint smile. "Today was a day of excitement no matter where members of the Alliance of Sun and Shadows went, it seems."

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Two: The Heir Game

Harry shook his head slightly when Draco looked at him. Draco was getting damn tired of that. He'd told Harry about his exploits with the Yaxley twins as soon as Harry had been released from the hospital wing, of course, but Harry had only remained silent since.

Well, silent and shaking his head.

"*What?*" he burst out, when Harry stole another sidelong glance at him over the extra Transfiguration essay that Henrietta Bulstrode was making him write. "Do you mean to damn me as reckless for going up against the Yaxley twins? I *knew* what I was doing, Harry. No one else might have been able to possess them, but *I* was. I—"

“Draco.” Harry’s voice was so deeply calm that Draco found himself shutting up, and blinking. “That’s not it at all.”

Harry’s hand slipped out and cupped his cheek, lifting his head until they were eye to eye. Draco hadn’t been far from him before, but now they were close enough that he felt stripped naked. Harry’s eyes had an almost perilous mixture of emotions in them, affection and something like awe.

“What you did was wonderful,” Harry whispered. “And nothing I would have imagined you capable of doing. The images you describe would have driven most people out of Sylvan’s mind, possession gift or not. Merlin, they might have driven most people out of their *own* minds. I didn’t even know if one could pierce through the sacrificial magic that guards them to invade their thoughts at all. But you managed, and you did so *well*. I’m just thrilled and surprised by that, Draco, and proud of you, and glad that my lover can defend himself. That’s all.”

He leaned forward and kissed Draco deeply and slowly enough that an immediate fire sparked to life in his groin. This was kissing with *intent*, as far as he was concerned, and he grabbed Harry’s neck when he made to pull back. Harry gave him a calm, wide-eyed look.

“I have a Transfiguration essay to write—“

“No, you don’t,” Draco argued, pushing the book and the scroll to the floor, and pushing Harry flat where they’d been. Harry went willingly, smiling up at him with bright eyes. Draco leaned down and kissed him again, demandingly, kicking the deep heat into high flames. “Not after that.”

Harry turned his head to the side so Draco could access his neck, and sighed blissfully as Draco bent to bite him.

It was only later that Draco considered the possibility that he wasn’t the only Slytherin in the room, nor the only person who could use honesty to get what he honestly wanted.

Indigena did not know what was wrong with her. She knelt at her Lord’s feet, among the remains of dozens of dead and dying Death Eaters. Their arms had bled blue-green goo that consumed their bodies for hours. The stink was awful. Some still died, screaming and thrashing, their cries and struggles both growing weaker as the poison did its work. She and her cousins—and Evan Rosier, she supposed, if one counted him—were the only true Death Eaters left. Lord Voldemort’s rage was all around her, black as ink an octopus had shot, with the swirling cold of deep sea water.

All those awful and high and solemn and horrible things, and she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

“*Indigena.*”

He might have found her out, and perhaps he would destroy her for that. Indigena could not bring herself to care. She lifted her head just enough to look at the new snake curled around his waist, which he was training to see for him. “My Lord?” she murmured.

“You are skilled in Transfiguration and in weaving with your plants to create a shadow of something that is not,” Voldemort breathed.

“Yes, my Lord.” Indigena’s amusement admitted a bit of confusion. She didn’t know why he was asking her this.

“We must push our plan forward, though Feldspar is dead,” her Lord said harshly. “A loss for a loss. We are *losing*, Indigena, in the eyes of the world, and we cannot afford to lose, or Dark wizards will not join us.”

After this, I don’t think many people will be rushing to join us, no matter how attractive we look, because few people have the ambition to collapse into mush, Indigena thought, but not even the wild irreverent violence of her heart would permit her to say that aloud. “Of course, my Lord,” she said instead.

“You will go to your bush that is capable of growing anything,” said her Lord. “You will encourage it to grow as close and complete a replica of Feldspar’s body as possible. We still need him.”

Indigena felt her eyes brighten. *A challenge, a true challenge, and one that uses my skills instead of my ability to kill.* It felt like too long since she’d had a task worthy of her abilities. “Yes, my Lord,” she repeated, and climbed to her feet.

She knew what her Lord would do with Feldspar's body. She found that she did not truly care, however. His plan had been in motion for a long time, long before Indigena began doubting her own loyalty, and if there was anyone who deserved the full fury of it, it was its targets.

Aurora ran a weary hand through her hair. Erasmus had been speaking about Harry's defiance of not just British law, but international law, for the past two hours, and there were only so many ways that phrases about the same thing could be combined to sound fresh and new.

“—doesn't *understand* that I am trying to think of the larger picture and life after the war—“

To her horror, Aurora had to bite her tongue to keep from retorting something about life *during* the war, and how that was at least as important as British wizards being able to freely travel in Europe some distant day. She smoothed her face out and shook her head. *I may keep all the ridiculous sentiments to myself that I like, but sharing them with Erasmus is out of the question.*

Unfortunately, Erasmus, who'd been pacing the paperwork shop that had become her office, turned around in time to see the headshake. His body bristled, and his mouth puckered in defense, as it did whenever he found someone who disagreed with him. “What is it?” he hissed.

Aurora stared at him in silence. She could see the brightening gleam in his eyes—not just fanaticism, but his own weariness of the situation. She could see his body strained taut with stress. One word in the right place, one kick at the weakest point of the structures holding him up, and he would collapse.

He is a terrible wartime Minister. The stress is destroying him. He might have done well in peacetime, but we'll never know.

Oddly, it was that observation, which she would have agreed with carelessly if anyone voiced it, that crystallized things for Aurora. She sat up and pinned Erasmus with a fierce gaze, which seemed to both startle and please him. Obviously he thought she had retained her interest in his rambling speech even as it passed the two-hour mark.

She had not. She had simply realized that Erasmus, being a terrible Minister, was making the Ministry die with him as a player in the war. And Aurora would not have that. She had not linked her fate inextricably with his, but she had linked her fate, she thought, inextricably to the Ministry's. *It should* be the refuge and the friend of those who were only trying to live through the war, those who did not want to fight and should not have to make the choice to do so. Aurora counted herself no friend of Voldemort, and though she was more sympathetic to what Harry was doing lately, he required things of his followers she could not give. That left the Ministry as her sole place to stand.

And she was interested in standing, not running off.

“Just thinking that you're absolutely right, sir,” she said crisply. “There are things about ordinary wizarding life Harry ignores. He might *think* he knows them and has taken them into account, but he hasn't. He would have to listen to advisers to have the full picture. No single wizard can comprehend everything about Britain's situation right now.”

Erasmus nodded, pleased. Aurora watched the numerous ambiguities in her speech swim right past him. “Good,” he said. “That is *good*, Aurora, that is right. I trust that I can leave you in charge of drafting a statement to the International Confederation explaining that Harry doesn't intend to obey their decree, and requesting help?” He moved towards the door. “We will need Lord-level wizards to handle him.”

You've had four in Britain already, and three of them were on the same side. And now you want to invite more in? Oh, yes, let's openly change the balance of power among the strongest wizards and witches in the world, and see what happens!

But Aurora was beyond saying something like that. Events had left Erasmus behind. The events might be only in her own head for now, but they would soon enough move into the real world. She could regard Erasmus with a sort of distant pity. He was so irrelevant, and soon he would know it.

“Of course, sir,” she said.

Erasmus nodded one more time, and shut the door behind him. Aurora spent a few moments carefully drawing up the long list of titles that would have to go at the head of a letter to the Confederation, watching the closed door the while. If he suddenly came back in because he wanted to discuss something else with her, he should see her there.

But he didn't return, and when Aurora subtly cast a spy spell that let her see through the door and into the hall beyond, he didn't stand there, and there was no sign of his Auror guard.

Aurora rose smoothly to her feet, and turned. She knew exactly whom she should speak to about unseating Erasmus and starting a subtle rebellion against the trend of the Ministry. It would not look strange for two of the Order of the Firebird to be together in the same office, anyway.

She opened the door of the room where she knew Cupressus Apollonis most often worked, and blinked when she found him facing her, a faint smile curving his lips. He placed his fingers together in a triangular shape and nodded to her. "Come in."

Aurora stifled irritation as she shut the door. Just because Cupressus was a bit faster than she was at seeing the obvious was no reason to turn against him. She had worked with people far more difficult than a smug Light pureblood bastard, Merlin knew.

"You know," said Cupressus, staring into her eyes. "You know that turning closer to Harry's side while preserving as much of the Ministry's neutrality and original mission as we can is the only way for those things we love to survive."

Aurora nodded. "I do." She leaned forward. "The question is, how do we do it?"

Cupressus pulled a long scroll from the side of the desk with a flourish. "I am so joyful that you happened to ask."

The rage had passed like a storm, like a wind on the sea, like the flying buttresses of cloud that guarded too many places in his islands to be coincidence and were signs of the presence of the Dark Lady Kanerva Stormgale. He was beyond rage and into the cold swamps of hatred.

No one could match Lord Voldemort for brooding, not for regretting lost chances. Should the soul-pattern be destroyed? Harry knew about it; Lord Voldemort had felt that spark of knowledge from him before the contact between their minds cut off. And while the power in that would gather and grow until Midwinter, it left him unable to take vengeance for his fallen Death Eaters in the meantime. And the wild Dark was chancy. Binding it, even with its own interest, was no guarantee that it would join him when Midwinter came.

But no, he could not turn. The pattern was nearly complete now, and had its own momentum; it would probably continue growing, summoning flesh and blood from his three remaining Death Eaters in order to finish itself. It had its own match and its own map in Harry's soul, and so long as that existed—which it would until Midwinter—it did not have *need* of a human vision to guide it. That simply made the matter more convenient.

But Lord Voldemort, he needed to do *something* to express his hatred. Being where it had all begun was no longer enough. Knowing the third was no longer enough. Anticipating the expression on Harry's face when the hammer fell and he knew everything was no longer enough.

And Harry had turned the trick of tormenting him back upon him.

The snake around his waist hissed. The basilisk eggs tucked in the corner of the burrow warmed themselves as under a summer sun and did not speak yet. The hatred in his mind throbbed like a beating heart.

There was—one thing he could do. One thing that Harry's own actions had neglected to protect him against. But it was risky, and he would have only one chance. More important, thought the Lord Voldemort, high and deep in the darkness, it would require some pain to himself.

But it would cause more pain to Harry.

He looked ahead into the darkness, and chose.

Harry frowned slightly at Connor. "Of course I understand that, Connor," he said. Why his brother would have been reluctant to come to him about this, he couldn't understand. "We were so close when we were children, because we didn't have anyone else. Of *course* you can feel neglected if you think I'm closer to other people than you." He reached out and put his hands on Connor's shoulders, ignoring the way that his right hand flinched at contact with the cloth of Connor's robes. It was only freaks of pain that dashed through his flesh which made him feel that way sometimes, and he could put up with them. "What I wish is that you had

told me about this before.”

Connor turned his head and glared the other way. Harry wasn't fooled. Connor's sullenness was a defense mechanism most of the time. He wanted other people to go away on the surface, but digging deeper and forcing him to confess what really bothered him yielded rich results.

“I didn't want to,” Connor muttered at last. “You always seemed so *happy*, Harry. And I wanted you to be happy for once in your life.” Then he turned back and scowled. “But it's not wrong to want to have a relationship with my brother, is it?”

“Of course not.” Harry looked around for a moment. Connor had met him with a torrent of words about feeling neglected in the hallway near Gryffindor Tower, and there was no comfortable place to sit. In the end, he conjured chairs and pushed them back near the wall so that they wouldn't completely obstruct the corridor, then sat Connor down in one. As he took the other, he made sure not to look away from his brother's hazel eyes. “What kind of relationship do you want us to have that's different from the one we have right now?”

“I just—I want—“ And Connor stopped and paused as if confounded, as if he didn't really know what he wanted. It had been Harry's experience that most people didn't. At least Connor was more aware of the costs and consequences of his desires than most people had the experience to be. He waited.

At last, Connor murmured, “I feel alone, sometimes. I know that's not true. I have you, and Parvati, and Ron, and Hermione, and more friends if I ask them to come a little closer. But I'm the only person with the last name of Potter in the world. I'm close to you, but I don't have importance and a unique gift in the war effort the way that Draco and Snape do, to justify their closeness.”

“You will never have to justify *anything*,” Harry said firmly.

“I feel as though I do.” Connor's fingers twined anxiously together. “And I don't know how. I've tried and tried, but I don't think I'll be able to learn my Animagus form before Christmas holidays. I don't know how to *help* you in battle, Harry. I didn't even do anything when I had Death Eaters directly beneath me during the attack on the Quidditch game. How can I help you when I'm so useless in battle?”

Harry blinked. “Connor,” he said. “I don't—I'm not leaving the world, or becoming part of a different one, just because I have to fight Voldemort. I don't only want people around me who can contribute to that effort. I want people living in safehouses, yes, if they're too frightened to fight, or if they're too young or otherwise incapable of it. But why would you think that you had to start being someone other than my brother just because there's a war on?”

Connor shrugged, staring at the floor. “I don't know. Everyone else was two people, who they used to be and the person who could help you, so I thought I had to be two people as well?” He mumbled the last words.

I wish he felt as though he could talk to me before matters got to this point. But it was hardly something Harry could scold him for, considering how well he kept his own secrets. He gently rubbed Connor's shoulder instead, and sought for words that would reassure his brother.

“Look,” he said at last. “Even if we can't share a battle-bond for the year of the War, or however long it lasts, we shared something in our childhood that no one else will ever approach. You know me better than anyone else, Connor—all the little things.” He paused, but his longing to keep what he said next secret was nothing next to the longing to reassure Connor. “Sometimes I think Snape and Draco want to pretend that everything which happened before I was eleven doesn't matter, that it was just a shadow I've thrown off now. And that's *not* true. You're the only person left who knew me all along, Connor. *That* is all I would ever need from you. You could become great in battle, and I wouldn't love you any more. You're my brother.”

Connor leaned close to him, and to Harry's relief, his eyes were bright and the jumping pulse in his throat had relaxed.

“Thank you, Harry,” he whispered. “If I feel that alone again, I'll remember this, or come to you.”

“I'm glad—“

Harry closed his eyes and shuddered as he felt an invisible hand grip his throat. It *hurt*. Fingers clamped down around his windpipe and started to choke him. When he stood and turned south, the pressure eased for a moment, then began again as if it had never been interrupted. It reminded him of nothing so much as the pinching that the wild Dark had used to lure him to the battlements.

“Harry?” Connor's voice sounded very far away.

“Someone’s choking me,” Harry whispered.

But now, along with the touch, came a voice. It was flat and smooth, without inflection—probably not human, Harry decided. It intoned words from a short distance away. When he concentrated, Harry realized the words were his name and a sort of legal refrain, repeated over and over again.

“Harry. Born Harry Potter. Not without a surname. Offered Black, offered Snape, offered Malfoy, offered Opalline, offered Burke. But one claim over all holds him. One claim in the name of magical heir, not in the name of legality or rejected blood.”

The voice paused, and then began repeating the passage again. This time, Harry felt a twinge in his mind to accompany it. He knew exactly where the twinge originated: the part of his thoughts that held and contained the pool of darkness.

Connor was shouting his name now. Harry had no strength to respond, though. He’d dropped to his knees, and the voice and the twinge and the choking sensation grew until they became all the world. This time, when the voice reached the end of the passage, it didn’t turn back to the beginning as before, but continued.

“One claim as magical heir, for magical heirs are the most sacred and valued of children, and no one sane refuses the claim. By the name of the one born Tom Marvolo Riddle and called Lord Voldemort, by the power shared, by the magic flowing between them, the lord calls his scion home.”

The choking and the twinge grew so bad that Harry came close to Apparating immediately. He was sure he would have ended up at Voldemort’s side if he did.

He couldn’t breathe.

He forced that fact away, slamming it behind the walls of his training to ignore pain, and faced the facts that mattered. Voldemort was performing the Heir-Call. It was rarely used; most parents didn’t want to summon their magical heirs back to their sides and bind them for the rest of their lives, which was what the spell did, even after a severe quarrel. And most disowned wizarding children could protect themselves against the spell easily enough by marriage, joining, or adoption into another family.

Harry had no surname, though, and magical heirship was considered more important than merely legal inheritance, so Voldemort could assert a claim.

There was an easy protection against that, of course. Name a family now, bind himself to that family, and Voldemort’s call must cease.

But Harry refused to let himself be driven into that. He had made the decision to reject his blood heritage freely. When and if he chose another lineage to replace that one, it wouldn’t be a stopgap measure like this one was, but a carefully considered decision.

By the time he finished that thought, he was gasping on the floor, and his vision burst with patches of black and red. His body rattled limply to Connor’s shaking. Had he ever had the strength to move and walk on his own? It seemed he hadn’t.

Voldemort’s laughter intruded over the calm repetition of the voice invoking the Heir-Call. The twinge grew worse. Harry knew which hold Voldemort was using to summon him, of course: the dark parts of his mind, the parts most similar to Voldemort’s, which he’d swum while trying to learn the secrets of his silence.

But that was not all he was, even if sometimes it felt like it, even if he associated mostly with Dark wizards and used mostly Dark magic.

Harry opened his eyes carefully, and drew on the air, using his magic to force it into and out of his lungs, making himself breathe as if he were a bellows. Connor’s anxious face loomed over him. Harry forced his hand to move and clasp his twin’s wrist. It was a tight enough grip that Connor winced, but that heartened Harry. That meant he had some strength left for something besides Apparating to Voldemort’s side and bowing down, which was rapidly becoming his overriding motive.

“Connor,” he whispered. “Cast a spell into me.”

Connor fumbled for his wand and drew it out so quickly that he nearly hit himself in the head with it. His voice trembled, but he managed to whisper, “*Rictusempra.*”

Harry gasped as the Tickling Charm settled over him, and began to jolt him, nearly sliding his hand from Connor’s. Perhaps it

hadn't been the best choice, but he wasn't going to criticize it now.

Connor had Declared, and he was Harry's twin. Light magic struck down and through Harry's body, and he drew on the current of it, felt Voldemort in his Darkness flinch away from it, and began to sing.

Through the song, the voice of a phoenix, he called to the Light, again and again, remembering that he could have mercy, that he could forgive his enemies, that he limited himself, that he valued free will, that in many of his morals he was more Light than Dark. His magic swelled around him, blue flames on his arms, and then struck in a lashing golden coil at Voldemort.

The murmuring voice fell silent in confusion. Harry grinned, though it felt as if he struggled to lift his lips against stone weights. He was Voldemort's magical heir in many ways, but not *entirely*. He had Parseltongue and the *absorbere* gift from him, and their ability to cast Dark spells drew on the same energy, but the Dark Lord had never loved or understood the Light. Harry believed he did both. He just chose not to join it.

The Light glittered in his mind's eye, and then the choking sensation on his throat and the twinge in his brain began to ease. Harry burned the threads of blackness that connected him and Voldemort, knowing it probably would cause some damage to him, too, and not caring. How *dare* Voldemort think he could use the Heir-Call. Just because Harry had rejected Potter did not mean he would consent to have another name forced on him, to be Riddle or whatever ridiculous substitution Voldemort might have devised.

For one moment, one spinning moment, they were face-to-face, Voldemort's eyeless white mask floating before him, and Harry loaded his voice with all the venom he could to spit back at him.

Your heir in magic, but never in spirit, in temperament, in hatred or cruelty. Not yours! Mine!

Then the magic whirled them apart, and Harry belled in pure triumph as the connections holding them failed. He realized he was lying on the floor, clutching his brother's hand and howling like a mad thing. He didn't care. Voldemort had done his worst, and Harry had won. He could howl all he liked.

"What *was* that?" Connor whispered, when he seemed content that Harry wasn't choking any more. He lowered his wand to the floor with a careful click.

"Voldemort tried to summon me," Harry said, and his voice was hoarse. He didn't care. He'd *won*, and he'd retained a part of his life as his own even when Voldemort tried to force him to give it up. *Take that, you bastard.* "It didn't work because you were here, and you're my twin, and you're Light, and we still have a connection that won't let me go. I rejected the Potter name, but I never rejected *you*, Connor. Even if I'm his magical heir and don't have a last name, he can't summon me that way." He closed his eyes.

"Maybe you should think about a last name," Connor muttered, as he gently pried his hand free.

Harry wasn't fooled by his tone. He knew his brother was grinning, caught somewhere between pride and embarrassment.

"No," said Harry. "Not until I want one." He closed his eyes more firmly than before, and took a deep, rattling breath. He would have to stand in a moment, and explain things to people.

For right now, though, they weren't here, and he didn't have to.

Monika raised an eyebrow and stepped away from the scrying pool in which she'd watched with interest as Lord Riddle tried the Heir-Call on Harry.

He was able to resist it. Interesting. Of course, he should become the heir of someone else soon, or perhaps the Dark Lord might try it again, with the wild Dark's help, and win this time.

She touched the worm wound around her arm and shook her head. Poor creature. It had so looked forward to being used. She had designed it carefully, knowing that when Harry killed his enemy, she would need to send the creature into him, have it drink as much of his essence as it could, and then pull it free and place it into herself. It would feed on her like the tapeworms it mimicked, draining her of some physical energy and mass, but giving her back magic in return for it, as waste. Meanwhile, her own magic would keep her alive and help restrict the worm's damage.

She gave a final, regretful glance at the pool she had charmed to warn her of any unusual interactions between Harry and Lord Riddle, and shook her head again.

Not today, then. Too bad.

“I told you so,” Alexandre said lazily, waving one hand and dissipating the image in the prophecy-pool before Pamela’s shocked eyes.

Pamela gazed blankly for a moment at the pool of liquid prophecy, the last remnants of fates that had already come true and had collected in this wild jungle where Alexandre made his home by some quirk of nature or magic. Then she covered her eyes and leaned back against a tree in thought.

“Should we involve the others?” she asked at last.

“Name me one who will help us rather than try to use Monika’s worm for his own gain,” Alexandre told her, voice extremely dry, “and I will fly to his home at once to speak with him.”

Pamela sighed. “Coatlilcue—“

“Cannot stand the sight of me, if you have forgotten, and will simply assume I am lying and wish to convene a full meeting of the Pact.” Alexandre shifted, his robe rustling as it brushed the tree. “There are problems with too strict a definition of Light.”

Pamela nodded reluctantly. The Light Lady of Mexico was her dearest friend after Jing-Xi, but she also would never do something so simple as lie. She would want Monika dealt with before the full Pact, if she believed Alexandre’s story at all. And Monika would deny it and destroy the evidence, and the whole trial would be useless.

“Jing-Xi?” she asked.

“Has her hands full with her own country and trying to help Harry within the limits the Pact set out,” Alexandre said in a voice full of oil. “One more piece of knowledge could set her over the boundary of what the Pact deems acceptable. Besides, she would go to confront Monika immediately, would she not?”

“Damn,” said Pamela. “Yes, she would.” She pulled her hand from her eyes and frowned at him. “And you, Alexandre? Do I dare ask why *you* don’t want the power that Lord Riddle wields?”

His dark eyes glittered when he smiled. “You forget, Seaborn. I know prophecy. I know the moment of my death. And that power would do me no good. It is not my destiny to have it.” He cocked his head, and the glitter was gone. “But we two may do something about it. Yes?”

Pamela nodded and stared at the prophecy-pool again. She did not see that they had any other choice.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Three: Defending

“No. I’m sorry.”

There was silence, but Harry thought that was mostly because Snape, Draco, and Regulus hadn’t been anticipating such a calm response. When they figured out this was the only one they were going to get, they would press further and faster, of course. But for now, Harry sat back and enjoyed the cup of tea that Snape had insisted on fetching him when he heard about Voldemort’s Heir-Call.

Snape shook his head slightly. Not surprisingly, he was the first to recover from Harry’s refusal. “Voldemort could try this again,” he said quietly. “And this time, no one might be there to save you. He might try it in dreams. From your description of the way he pulled on your mind, he did know that you were present in his head when you tried to view his plans. But could you detect him in the same way?”

“I don’t know.” Harry shook his head and sipped the tea once more. “I probably won’t know until he does try.”

“This is *serious*,” said Draco. Harry wondered when he had ever done anything to suggest that it wasn’t serious, but let that thought go when Draco continued, face earnest. At least this wasn’t the scolding that he could easily have received just a little while ago, before Draco and Snape sought new ways to talk to him. “I think that you should take the last name of Malfoy, Harry, but I’ll support whatever decision you make. Just choose one.”

“I won’t let Voldemort force me into doing this, any more than I’d let him pick a battleground.” Harry set his teacup down gently on the arm of his chair. “I’ve chosen, Draco, and for now I choose to remain nameless.”

Regulus sighed. “Harry, as much as I would like you to have free choice, you cannot. If the bonds of being the legal heir to Black were not enough to stop the Heir-Call, then the line of protection I counted on doesn’t work. The Light defended you. Will it do that forever? Will it do that if Voldemort tries the Heir-Call again at Midwinter, when both he and the wild Dark want you?” He paused, nibbling his lip. “You know that I would like you to become Harry Black. But I agree with my cousin. Choose the name you wish to have.”

“And Professor Snape would like me to become Harry Snape.” Harry cocked his eyebrows. “He has as good a claim as you two do. He’s my father.”

Snape said nothing. He didn’t need to, though. Harry could see the agreement and dissatisfaction with Harry’s proposed solution moving in his dark eyes.

“And that’s one reason why I won’t choose,” Harry continued. “Not until I have a distinct preference that I can argue for and defend.” *Which might be never. I enjoy being Harry, forcing people to view me without a convenient name to stamp on my forehead.* “I don’t want to cause competitions or resentment between you three. And, if I chose too quickly and without thought, my brother might wonder, justifiably, why I couldn’t remain a Potter.”

“Well, of *course* you couldn’t remain a *Potter*,” Draco said, disgust in every syllable.

Harry smiled and stood, stretching his arms over his head. Snape and Regulus both stood at once, as if he would fall. Harry rolled his eyes. His brain didn’t hurt, and the pressure around his throat had faded with the effects of one of Snape’s potions and the warm tea. He would tell them if he was hurting, now. That was one thing they’d earned by no preemptive scolding.

“I’m not taking a name,” he said pleasantly. “Not right now. I do thank you for offering, but I won’t.”

He swept out of Snape’s offices, with Draco trailing behind him. He knew he’d won the fight because he was the least desperate. The rest of them were more interested in Voldemort’s threat than he was. It had come once, and he’d survived it thanks to his connection to his brother. He could survive it again, especially because he now knew the signs.

“Harry.”

He looked over his shoulder. Draco’s face had taken on a thoughtful expression it hadn’t worn since he heard about the attack. Harry nodded to him, and waited for what he would say.

“Part of it is about politics, too, isn’t it?” Draco cocked his head. “And not just us, or whether we’d resent someone else whose name you took. Not that I would,” he added haughtily. Harry ducked his head in a swift nod of agreement, and to hide his smile. “If you become Harry Malfoy, the Malfoys are suddenly elevated to a position of acclaim and grace that my father’s actions lost for us. Add Snape, and suddenly Professor Snape is an important political figure. And if you’re Harry Black, then you’re making claim to the Blacks’ heritage of glory and madness.”

“Very good,” said Harry, and Draco blushed and even gave a little wriggle at his praise. Harry had to raise a hand in front of his mouth to cover his smile this time. In the small things, Draco was so easy to please. “Yes, that’s another reason, but it’s not as important as my wanting to have the choice. I’m already juggling several political balls.” He sighed as he thought about the story that had appeared in the Daily Prophet that morning. Rita Skeeter had managed to ferret out the story about Squibs’ Association, and though of course she put a flattering spin on it, the *Daily Prophet* was already printing letters claiming that Harry never should drain anyone’s magic but an enemy’s. “I don’t need my enemies suddenly thinking that one group of my allies is more important to me than the rest.”

“Would you consider Malfoy?”

And then there were some things with Draco that weren’t so simple. Sometimes he did distrust what Harry said on the surface, and wanted to hear them over again. Harry turned to face him, reaching out to grip his shoulders. He let his fingers stroke reassuringly over cloth and skin as he stared into his partner’s eyes.

“I promise I’m doing that,” he said. “It doesn’t mean I’ll choose it, but it’s one of my top three choices.” He watched Draco preen, then added, “Though sometimes I think I should choose Opalline, and then I would have an excuse not to fight.”

Draco scowled at him. “Don’t even joke about that, Harry,” he said, putting out a hand, gripping the back of Harry’s robe, and pulling him tightly against him. “We need you in the war. The war needs you.”

Harry rolled his eyes, safely out of sight, and put his head down on Draco’s shoulder. *The one thing I’m not going to forget is that.*

“This is still just an experiment,” Neville said as he put down the potted lily gently on the floor of the tunnel. “It doesn’t mean that they’ll work, you know. We have to test them.”

“That you managed this at all is wonderful,” said Connor, and watched in a little wonder as Neville swelled with pride. *Is just speaking the truth enough to get people to behave that way? Well, truth and flattering lies, I suppose. Harry would use that line even if Neville’s plants were useless.* “Let’s see what they can do.”

They had two rows of the potted lilies, tall flowers with faint golden spots on their white petals, lining either wall of the escape tunnel out of Hogwarts that Parvati’s spot of light had discovered. Neville set the last one down and stepped over to join Connor at the far end of the tunnel, towards the hole that led beyond the Forbidden Forest. At the other end, Peter waved to them.

“Here I am, just a regular Death Eater walking through the tunnel, not planning mayhem at all...” Peter sang under his breath as he began to walk between the rows of lilies.

He passed several without incident. Connor frowned, and avoided glancing at Neville. Maybe this wouldn’t work after all.

But then one of the lilies quivered like a tuning fork, and the ripples and vibrations spread from flower to flower. By the time Peter reached the middle of the row, the lilies leaned towards him, their petals spread wide, their golden “tongues” writhing as if to catch his scent.

Then two of them reached out, and curled about his limbs with uncompromising strength. Peter made as if to reach for his wand, and the lilies tightened. Then the rest of them lunged.

There was a complicated moment when Connor had considerable difficulty in seeing what was happening. It ended with Peter on his back several inches above the floor, tendrils turning his arms and legs into a mass of green, lily petals locked on his face and attempting to suck his breath out.

“They work,” Neville whispered in wonder.

“They do,” Connor pointed out, “and now someone’s got to stop them from hurting Peter.”

Neville started, then clapped his hands. The lilies slowly lowered Peter to the floor and uncoiled from him, though many of them swayed as if asking Neville if he were *sure* about doing this. Peter took a deep gasp for breath and sat up, rolling back his left sleeve. Connor winced. He was bleeding from a gash near the Dark Mark, which had triggered the lilies into attacking.

“Oh, Professor Pettigrew, I’m so sorry—“ Neville began in horrified tones.

“It’s quite all right, Longbottom.” Peter’s voice was firm as he touched the wound with his wand and murmured *Integro*. Most of the bleeding slowed, though Connor knew he would need to visit Madam Pomfrey to have it healed completely. “Professor Snape and I will just have to remember that we can’t possibly take this route out of the castle.” He smiled and stood up. “Of course, if an attack does happen at Hogwarts, we’ll probably leave another way in any case, since we’ll be fighting.”

“And any student can take this tunnel.” Connor eyed the lilies. “How often do they need to be watered, Neville?”

“Not at all,” said Neville proudly, as the lilies nodded and swayed towards the sound of his voice. “They *grew up* on water. They’ve drunk enough for a year of vigilance. They’ll keep watch until next year, now.”

Connor smiled and waved his wand to begin casting Disillusionment Charms on the plants. It seemed their defense for this section of the castle was complete.

They met Fred and George in the middle of another corridor, the one that led from Ravenclaw Tower down towards the major escape tunnel. The twins were standing, one above the other, on a broad section of the half-ramp, half-stair that was meant to insure the students didn't have room to lag, and arguing hotly with one another.

"—couldn't work, because we can't adapt—"

"To all Houses? Of course we can. Stop being such a—"

"Disbeliever? Sometimes, one must take you to task, dear brother—"

"Brother of mine, who doesn't understand the simplest thing about jokes—"

"Fred? George?" By the speed with which their heads turned towards him, Connor thought he knew who was who. He shook his head in private amusement. He'd thought the twins would have finished arranging their traps for potential Death Eaters already. "What's wrong?"

The twins pointed at each other. "He," said Fred, "wants to set up tricks that will track students by the House crest on their robes. *He* doesn't understand that we would have to arrange four different layers of spells, one for each House. That's too—"

"Much?" George leaned forward and pointed at Fred a little harder, as if that would convince Connor of his rightness. "*I* say that we can do it easily, use the same spell for every House at Hogwarts. But he won't believe me. Disbeliever."

"Idiot."

"Moron."

"Imbecile."

"Skeptic."

Connor hastily intervened; he'd been witness to several arguments like this in the Burrow, and he knew they could go on for hours. "Well, we have House crests." He touched the Gryffindor crest on his own robes. "Why doesn't George use the spell that he thinks will detect students from all Houses, not making it specific to Gryffindor, and we can test it?"

George leaned forward, seized his hand, and pumped it brutally. "You are a brilliant man, Connor Potter, sir," he said, in an uncannily good imitation of a house elf. "George Weasley is honored to work for Connor Potter sir."

Connor coughed, feeling his cheeks flush. *Good thing we didn't have any house elves by the time Harry and I were born. I couldn't have commanded them anyway.* "Yes. Well. What's the incantation?"

George straightened and cleared his throat as though performing for a bigger audience than his brother, Connor, Neville, and the very amused Head of Gryffindor. "*Aediculae de Hogwarts protego!*"

A colored smoke left his wand and sauntered through the corridor. Squinting, Connor could make out that the smoke was purple, changing to blue. It snapped abruptly into taut lines along the walls, and clung there, so faint that Connor needed a strong *Lumos* charm just to see where it had gone.

He moved cautiously forward.

The smoke didn't react. Connor walked the length of the corridor, to the foot of the tunnel that began the steep climb to Ravenclaw Tower, and came back, then had Neville do the same thing. No reaction. Connor glanced uneasily at George. "Is it supposed to do that?"

"Of course," said George. "Now watch." He took something from his pocket and fixed it to his robes with a few whispered words. Peter rolled his eyes.

"Do I want to know how you got a Slytherin House crest?" he asked.

"No, sir." George gave him an angelic smile. "I'm sure it would only distress a genial old man like yourself." He turned and strutted up the hall, his head lifted and a sneer on his lips. Connor bit his own lips to keep from laughing. He couldn't be *sure* that

George was mimicking Draco—there were other Slytherins who walked the same way—but it would add to the authenticity of the illusion if he were.

Once again, he passed through the corridor without being stopped. By then, though, Fred had his arms crossed and was shaking his head smugly. “Of course you think that the spell works, dear brother,” he said. “Having it do nothing is the prime requirement for being able to claim genius with no hard work.”

George grinned ferally, and Connor saw, a moment before Fred, how he’d been smarter than his twin for once. “That’s why we need someone who’s not wearing a House crest at all to test it,” said George, and then dragged his twin forward and down half the corridor before he could react.

At once, the glittering bars of a cage grew around Fred. Then they flipped him neatly upside down and hung him by his heels, with his robes dangling past his face. A smoking brand crept out of the wall towards his flank, as if it were going to burn a pattern into his skin.

Fred yelped and wriggled. George was laughing so hard that it was up to Peter to take his out his wand and say firmly, “*Finite Incantatem.*”

Fred dropped to the ground, and spent a few moments wiping at his face and robes. George had fallen to the ground, laughing still. The brand disappeared back into the wall, and Connor heard the vigilant hum of the spell.

“I *will* get you back.”

Fred was giving George the evil eye. George winked at him and sprang to his feet.

“Of course you will, brother mine,” he said. “But at least you aren’t a skeptic any more.”

“You’re still an idiot.”

“Moron.”

“Imbecile.”

Connor rolled his eyes and left them to it.

Henrietta had decided it would be a good idea to take a walk. If she carried two pasties with her from the kitchens, and one was made of blueberries and one of raspberries, that did not mean anything. They steamed gently in her pocket, and were companions while she moved.

She went into the Forbidden Forest, watching as the branches arched overhead to frame a sky gone blue with one of the last fair days they would have before winter truly descended. Now and then ice glittered from a sheltered nook, but the snow that had fallen four days ago had failed to establish a lasting hold. The main presence in the Forest was the leaves that rustled and eddied around her, stirred by her robes and sometimes her spells into swirling patterns of color.

She had thought that might make it easier for him to find her. And it did. Halfway through a complicated dance of gold and orange, she saw him leaning against a tree, staring at her with dark eyes.

“Greetings, Evan,” Henrietta said, then made the leaves dance through her widespread arms. She took out the blueberry pasty, hefted it in her hand for a moment, and tossed it towards him. He caught it handily and bit into it, never taking his eyes from her the while.

“I know what you are doing,” he said.

“Good.” Henrietta made the leaves settle on her head like a crown, and smiled at him. “This would have been boring if you didn’t. You know that I enjoy enemies who can challenge me.”

He licked his fingers as he finished his pasty, and then cocked his head. “Blueberries? That says that you are sorry for me, Henrietta, that you expect me to die. You only enjoy challenges you can win.”

She shrugged gaily. It was not her fault that Evan Rosier did not completely understand her, while she walked as close as anyone could to understanding the shadows of his madness. "I didn't know that I was going to win when I held you down and raped you, the night you came to 'convince' me to join the Death Eaters. I only knew that you excited me more than anyone I'd ever known, and I wanted to fuck you."

His eyes had darkened further with the mention of the rape. Henrietta breathed softly, watching him, then shook her hair and let the leaves drift out of it, filtering down behind her with a crack-rustle.

"I will kill you," he said. "I need your help, and I will have it, and then I will kill you. But I will rape you first."

"You can't rape the willing, Evan." Henrietta took a step closer to him. "Do you want to feel how willing I am? My thighs are wet. They always are when I face you." The sky above them was very bright, and the grass around her stark with color. The ice glittered from its nooks.

His eyes stared at her. Henrietta understood him, and waited.

"There is a task that someone has asked me to help her with," Evan whispered. "Juicy targets, plump targets. Let me have the other pasty that you carry. I can smell it."

"Smell that, and not my arousal?" Henrietta took out the raspberry pasty and tossed it to him. "You're getting slow, Evan, very slow."

He ate a few bites, paused halfway through, and said, "That is the task that I will ask you to help with."

"I know, Evan," said Henrietta patiently. "I once told you that we were destined to meet and duel out our hatred, that enmity shared bound us to do more than taunt each other now and then. I will be happy to help you destroy these enemies, because it moves us one step closer to that moment."

Evan finished the pasty, delicately licked his fingers, and then handed her a brilliant smile. "Because you are the only one who has ever brought me sweets," he said, "I will warn you of this. Midwinter will be hard. And another blow falls soon, one that hands the victory to my Lord if you are not careful. At least, it hands him victory over the minds and hearts of the people."

Henrietta shrugged a little. "Harry will handle that. You and I have another dance, Evan, another way to walk." For a moment, she thought she heard a roll of thunder in the sky, but when she looked up, the heaven was as high and fair as ever.

In that moment, Evan crossed the distance between them and seized her by the throat, bearing her back against the trunk of an oak. Henrietta smiled at him, and tilted her head so that he could see the place where her pulse beat. That made the skin pull tight against his hold, and her vision wavered and burst into poison ivy as he held her hard enough to threaten the flow of her air. Beautiful, so beautiful, the sky was so beautiful and clear.

"I shall have you," Evan said.

Henrietta knew what he meant by that better than he thought she did. He would break her, he meant. That was what truly infuriated him about Henrietta, the reason that he was a pawn in her games instead of the other way around. Other people feared him, such as Hermione, the girl he had taken prisoner before he freed Durmstrang and sliced with the Severing Curse in the Midsummer battle. He could get inside them, leave his presence as a shadow in their heads. Henrietta had never been afraid of him, and *she* was a shadow in *his* head.

The hatred between them was something very nearly sacred, almost like the bond that Harry and Voldemort shared, but Evan did not want that. He did not want to be bound to anyone like that.

Too bad. He is.

Henrietta leaned up and kissed him on the side of the mouth. He dropped her as if she had tried to poison him and reeled back, wiping at his face, spitting out foul insults.

Henrietta watched him with half-lowered eyelids, her breath coming fast. When she shifted, her thighs moved against each other with squelching sounds, and she felt the soft tingle of arousal building to a more insistent pressure in her belly. She would have liked to come now. But, of course, Evan would never consent to watch her do it, or to offer her assistance in the doing. There were limits to his sadism. Always, always, they concerned her.

She stood straight and met his eyes. She could see the madness beyond the blueberry-darkness, the screaming pit that he had only escaped by a few steps. She could drive him into it, if she wanted.

She chose not to. Today.

“Love is more sweet and comelier,” she whispered, “than a dove’s throat strained out to sing.”

She saw his eyes flash with rage and recognition. She had taken lines that he would have liked to say, and turned them back on him. She smiled, and advanced another step. He backed up.

“Yea, though God hateth us, he knows that hardly in a little thing,” she said, and Evan stumbled trying to get away from her, “love faileth of the work it does till it grow ripe for gathering.”

Evan jerked his head, bared his teeth, and vanished. Henrietta watched a scrap of pasty fall to the ground in his wake; he must have been holding it in his hand, but not tightly enough for it to follow him in the Apparition. She came to it, knelt down, and held her nose to it.

It was blueberry.

She murmured the final stanza to the piece of pasty, to the Forest, to the dancing leaves and the frozen ones.

*“I am grown blind with all these things:
It may be now she hath in sight
Some better knowledge; still there clings
The old question. Will not God do right?”*

Lucius examined the letter in front of him with a faint smile. It was by an oversight that it had come to him. Doubtless, the wizards and witches who had written it had imagined the Mr. Malfoy in residence at Malfoy Manor to be Draco. And his son was supposed to come by in a few hours, to collect his post and have his weekly serious talk with Lucius, as though he imagined his father had any choice now but to follow both him and Harry with serious devotion.

This letter, though—

He had not known Draco’s ambitions extended so widely.

He studied it again. It was from a group of Aurors in the American Ministry, who were indicating dissatisfaction with the American Minister’s decisions in the past. One of them was a choice not to help Britain with its “small problems,” including Voldemort and the broken Statute of Secrecy, but only one of them. Yes, they were interested in hearing more about the British *vates* whom Draco thought they would have to deal with sooner or later anyway, considering all the magical creatures bound with webs in America, and perhaps getting on his good side now.

Interesting.

Lucius had already memorized all the pertinent information, including names and those details that might allow him to contact the American wizards again, and he knew he could feign his son’s handwriting fairly well *if* necessary. Now he was pressing the letter carefully back into the envelope, and casting charms that would make it seem as if he had never opened the envelope at all.

Draco was doing what he had to do to raise the Malfoy name back to prestige and make the world a little more comfortable for both himself and Harry. That much, Lucius approved of. And, of course, Draco had evidently started this correspondence when Lucius had fled, and he had never thought that he would have to deal with his father again.

But he might be going about it the wrong way. The letter indicated that the American wizards were letting Draco’s age influence them. They were trying to take him for what they wanted while ignoring his own demands. And while Lucius knew his son could resist such crude manipulations for the most part, he still might lose something that he didn’t want to lose.

It was time for Lucius to intervene.

Not under false pretenses unless he had to, of course. He would tell the Americans who he was, and doubtless endure some abuse before they listened to him. But money spoke, and so did past power, and the assumed innocence of his crimes that his acquittal in

the First War had won him. He was a Dark wizard, yes, but he was not so Dark as to be a willing servant of Voldemort, they might well think.

Lucius would play with them. Find out what they wanted with his son and the man who was essentially his Lord now. Coax them into revealing more than they had to Draco. Show them what a master player of the game was like, while at the same time maintaining the obsequious tone that most American wizards expected of most British.

It was, after all, only self-defense.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Four: The Hammer Falls

Aurora yawned, and pushed a hand against her mouth, trying to conceal it. Cupressus looked up at her at once, though, shaking his head. “You have an appointment to go to, my lady,” he said. “With the contact that you are so reluctant to inform me of, and then to your bed.”

“I wish I could stay.” Aurora sat back and stared at the paperwork spread around her. Cupressus’s plan to recover respect for the Ministry was multi-tiered, and she knew she hadn’t even finished reading every stage of it yet, let alone making all the comments and contributions she could. “I’d like to—“

“Yes, I know you would,” Cupressus interrupted. “But your contributions would be limited by the level of your weariness. I would prefer that that not be the case. I would prefer that you approach something this important with open eyes and a fresh mind.”

Aurora smiled. Cupressus had not lost the side of him that loved to command others at every opportunity. “I’ll remember that,” she said, and stood. “Good night for now, sir.”

Cupressus made a humming sound under his breath and bent over the paperwork again, then grabbed a quill to scribble a note next to a diagram. Aurora suspected he would remain here long after she’d gone to bed herself, adjusting his own plans and then attempting to blend the new ideas with the old.

She went quietly towards the small closet where she and Feldspar had agreed to meet that night, reviewing the plans in her own mind. She had to admit she couldn’t see a flaw in them. Their coup would be a slow one, timed to allow the Light and the Acting Minister as much dignity as possible. Besides, their more violent actions were restricted by the oaths they’d sworn to the Order of the Firebird. So it would take some months, perhaps as much as half a year.

It doesn’t matter, though, Aurora reminded herself. What really matters is that we’ll have recovered the Ministry as a place where ordinary wizards can be proud to stand, and where we can hover between two sides of the war without looking like cowards. That dream is worth any amount of sacrifices.

She had never thought she would feel so close to Minister Scrimgeour, she mused as she arrived at the closet where Feldspar should already be, unless the Aurors had managed to stop him this time. She could see the import of his dream now, in a way she might not have managed to if he were still alive to carry it. Sometimes the dreamer obscured the dream. Aurora believed she might have been even more sympathetic to the concept and the task of the *vates* if it didn’t belong to the man who had killed her children.

But Minister Scrimgeour had died and left his dream behind. And Aurora had been able to pick it up, turn it around, and decide that, after all, it was worth protecting and preserving and dreaming. She felt it around her shoulders now like a heavy, warm cloak as she opened the door.

She started when she saw two figures in the darkness, and not just one. “Feldspar?” she whispered.

He straightened and nodded to her. His movements were more jerky than usual, but Aurora supposed that might have something to do with the triumph in his eyes. And if the person at his feet was who she thought it was, Aurora could see why. It *looked* like Indigena Yaxley, wrapped in her own vines.

“What happened?” Aurora whispered.

“She finally took it a step too far,” Feldspar replied harshly, his chest heaving with emotion. “She was one of those who tortured me at her Lord’s command. And he had taken to leaving her alone with me while she did it, because he trusted her so much.

"I thought she would kill me. She pressed so hard. She would cast healing spells when necessary to reverse the worst of the damage and revive me, but then she would start again." He shook his head, and Aurora heard his hair rustle. "It built up in the middle of my chest, that anger, until I thought it would burst. And it did." He looked down at Indigena's wrapped body and nodded in satisfaction. "So I managed to take her, and I brought her here. I thought you'd want her more than you'd want me to remain in Voldemort's service."

"She killed the Minister," Aurora mused, staring down at Indigena. "And of course we couldn't catch her and execute her to show our people that we took that crime seriously. We can now. Thank you." She moved closer, enchanted by the way that the vines wrapped Indigena like braided ropes.

One of them writhed around her neck before she realized what was happening.

Indigena opened her eyes and sat up with a sigh and a stretch. The vines binding her retracted into her skin; they'd been tendrils, Aurora saw, fully under her control. She tried to turn to Feldspar for help, only to see him collapsing into a mixture of leaves, bushy roots, and half-spoiled fruit.

"He was a replica, born of one of my plants," said Indigena. "Really, you ought to communicate with your supposed allies more. Then you would have known that Feldspar Yaxley died in the assault on Hogwarts." She moved closer to Aurora, one vine catching her chin and tilting her head back. "You are cleverer than I thought you would be, far more the heir to Scrimgeour's vision of things than I ever believed. I thought you would be an easy pawn, and then things changed." Indigena shrugged. "It is a pity that I have to kill you."

Aurora struggled madly, but she might as well be pressing against iron chains for all that the vines gave. She sought for words that would allow her to bargain, to keep her life. "How did you get in here?" she blurted, at last.

"The wards are still not set up to detect plant magic, of course," said Indigena. "Too few wizards who know it. Wrap my wand with leaves, and I can walk through the wards. Wrap myself with vines, and it hardly registered. And, of course, it helped that I did know all the routes that Feldspar so cleverly mapped through the wards and the Aurors, since I was the source of them." She reached out and flicked a lock of Aurora's hair back from her forehead. Her leaf-shadowed face was vaguely regretful, Aurora saw. "If it helps, I *am* sorry that I have to do this. I asked my Lord if I could spare your life and merely make you a victim of another kind, but he said no." Indigena shrugged, and Aurora felt the vines tighten. "So to death we must go. I promise, Madam Whitestag, it will be gentle."

For a moment, outrage, indignation, and hatred bubbled wildly in Aurora's chest. She could not believe this was happening to her, that she was dying. It *must* be a dream. She had fallen asleep on her way to the meeting with Feldspar, and this was her reward for neglecting her duties, a nightmare.

But the vines tightened, and her breath began to come raggedly, and she knew she had a choice. She could go to her death much as Scrimgeour had, denying it was happening, unable to react in time to do anything worthwhile.

Or she could use the moment of her death to make a difference.

She let her head fall back, and directed all her thoughts fiercely and endlessly to what she wanted. The moment of one's death was useful, if pitted against one's enemies in the right way. She was dying anyway. If she chose to die a willing sacrifice, then she might still have a part to play in the long drama of war and blood that would follow her death.

Her last thoughts were, therefore, of Indigena.

Indigena watched calmly as Aurora Whitestag's face grew blue, and shook her head as the woman stopped breathing. "I wonder why this is part of my fate, to continually kill people I admire," she remarked to the limp body, as her darlings started to unwind from it. "I thought Minister Scrimgeour would be the last of those, but instead you had to develop a conscience and a will and start acting effectively. Was that really necessary?"

"Yes. It was."

Indigena started badly. The voice was Aurora's, though it sounded distant and cold, as though she were speaking down a tunnel filled with wind. She took a step away, eyeing the corners. Had she killed someone wearing a glamour, or Polyjuiced to look like the Acting Minister's second-in-command? That would reveal a level of deviousness in Aurora she hadn't known was there, but

then, Whitestag had surprised her several times since the beginning of this plan with Feldspar.

She understood a moment later, as she watched silver liquid collect around the body, glowing vividly, like mercury. The drops ran together, and bubbled up into the shape of a woman with long hair. Her face was visibly younger than that of the Aurora Indigena had killed. And she looked fiercer, too.

Indigena frowned. "You just had to come back as a ghost, didn't you?" she demanded.

The newborn ghost opened her eyes and gave Indigena a feral smile. "Yes," she said. "I dedicated my last moments to wishing for that. And I was thinking of you, too." She leaned forward, raising an eyebrow, and sending a whisk of cold breath across Indigena's face that made the leaves beneath her skin tangle together trying to get away. "That means that I'll be here looking for some way to defeat you, Indigena Yaxley. I hope you enjoy the enemy you've created." And she turned away, tattering and drifting through the far wall as scraps of mist.

She left Indigena to blink, for a moment. But no strike of vengeance immediately came. It seemed that the ghost was content to wait for a better moment.

I didn't plan that. I wish I had known something like that might happen. But, changed as she seemed, I wouldn't have pegged Aurora Whitestag as having the amount of self-control and foresight necessary to use the moment of her death like that.

She shook herself like a dog shaking off water and moved past the moment. The first major task her Lord had asked of her had been accomplished. Aurora lay motionless on the floor, and if she wasn't quite dead, her ghost at least seemed uninterested in interfering further with this task.

Now for the second part.

Indigena closed her eyes and lifted her arms, a soft, vibrating song traveling through her lips. She knew, though she could not see it, that Feldspar's body would be vibrating like a whirlpool, the tendrils and plants she'd stored there climbing out of him and reaching for the walls. Roots writhed, digging into stone and metal and finding ways through them. She would bind the whole of the Ministry into a cage of roots before she was done, vines blocking the way out, flowers breathing calming fragrances into the air, a garden coaxing people to stay at their desks.

When that was done, she would call to her Lord and let him know.

The caged Ministry would become a cage of Squibs as her Lord drank and drained their magic, and grew immensely more powerful. Indigena shivered a little, to think of how strong he would be when all this was done.

Cupressus heard it as a shrill, nagging whine in his left ear, the cry of a wounded unicorn foal. He sat up and gave Aurora a moment of silence. The ward was one he had cast to warn him if she died suddenly.

Then he was up and moving. He doubted that Erasmus had killed her in a fit of temper. That made it far more likely that Voldemort and his people had created another entrance into the Ministry. And in that case, he knew what he had to do. He always knew what he had to do. It was other people who ruined the pattern by moving about in ways that pawns, and even knights and kings and queens, were not supposed to move.

He opened the door, and something grabbed the knob and tried to slam it shut again. Cupressus dragged hard, though, and so managed to see the writhing vine before more tendrils joined it and yanked the door from its hands.

Cupressus nodded. He had planned even for this. What the Dark had tried once, they might try again. They had sent the vine-born Yaxley to murder the Minister. That meant they might do it again. Cupressus did not think that Erasmus was their main target, or they wouldn't have bothered to murder Aurora, but she was here, the Yaxley, Voldemort's running hound.

So he gathered himself, sinking carefully into his soul, where golden Light ran in streams like water. There were many Light spells he could not use at this point of the year, when the sun was on the other side of the earth, but he had made a point to study those that relied on inner Light, so that he would never be helpless. Evil could strike in any month.

At last, he opened his eyes, aimed his wand at the door, and murmured, "*Caminus intimus.*"

The fire soared forth from his heart, powered by his own heat, his conception of the inner forge that the spell literally called on.

Cupressus moved forward, gesturing the fire back and forth between his wand and heart, singing under his breath. The heat warmed and centered him, and reminded him of what he was: a Light wizard, opposing the Dark. That he had to do it through subterfuge and without the Minister's cooperation was a pity, but needs must when the Dark arose.

The door burst into flames. The vines beyond it lashed forward, trying to get through the fire, and dripping dew-cold liquids from their stalks that were meant to quell the heat. Cupressus laughed. The vines were mighty, but they could not quench the fire without killing him, and they could not kill him unless they quenched the fire.

He raised his wand. The fire danced to meet him, gladly roaring. The vines withered and blackened in the heat, and then fell, and Cupressus's passage to the corridor beyond was clear.

Clad in a cloak of brilliant fire, Cupressus strolled towards the Minister's office. He knew his duty. It was not what he *wanted* to do—he wanted to find Aurora's body and give her a proper burial; he wanted to simply leave and go home, from the place where he could more easily command his people—but it was what was needed. The Ministry would fall this day as a symbol of hope. The Acting Minister must escape, so that he could be the symbol in its place.

No, Erasmus was not the choice he would have made. But he was the choice that *had* been made. Cupressus would cooperate with him and use him as a figurehead to help them win this war.

He burned the vines that were trying to get through the Minister's door, and stepped over the body of an Auror who had fallen fighting them. A giant flower gusted fragrance at him, a visible cloud of pink gas, which was probably meant to calm and soothe him. Cupressus closed his eyes, and the flames crossed in front of him like dancing scimitars, gesturing the fragrance away. Cupressus snorted. *Dark wizards are pitiful when they think they can take a Light wizard with simple tricks.*

He broke through the Minister's door, and then stood in front of Erasmus's desk. Erasmus was sinking back, his eyes on the walls, where roots gleamed through star-like cracks. He jerked his head around when he heard Cupressus enter, and broke into a fit of shivering.

"Are you with them?" he whispered.

Cupressus rolled his eyes. "The day I join the Dark is the day I commit suicide," he answered. "Quite literally. The vows I have sworn to the Light would kill me before I could accomplish anything for the Dark." He cast a deep sleeping enchantment on the Acting Minister before he could say anything more. Yes, he had to be safe, so that he could be their "leader" when this fall was done, but he would only cause trouble if he were awake, getting in the way and trying to give orders when Cupressus was the one who had to do that. Cupressus would make sure that he was safe, but listening to him was out of the question, as it had been for months.

He strode around the desk, scooped up Erasmus in his arms, and turned around to consider the vines that entwined the door. They were thickening, small tendrils braiding together, all of them slick now with water. They would choke him if he tried to get back through them, and they might succeed.

I can save no one else. Aurora is already dead, and I must get my most important burden to safety. Cupressus hefted Erasmus and snorted. *That a day would come in Britain when a man like this is the most important burden!*

He touched the golden torque around his neck, which most of the time was hidden under the collar of his robe. It gleamed, and then the tug of a Portkey hooked under his navel and dragged him and Erasmus back to his house.

Vines and dew and shattered door and cracking stone walls vanished, and Cupressus stood in his receiving room, blazing. He calmed the inner fire with a word, then laid Erasmus down on the floor and checked him for burns. Granted, burns would have meant Cupressus was losing control of his magic, which would have been a bad sign, but still, he should check. Sometimes such flames conveyed any hidden anger that the caster felt, as he felt towards Erasmus, no matter how much the wizard tried to hold back on the fire.

"Cupressus?"

He glanced up. Artemis stood in the door of the receiving room, her hands clasped to her mouth.

"The Dark Snake has attacked the Ministry," said Cupressus calmly. "I have the Acting Minister. But he will not be awakening for some time. He swallowed too much smoke," he added.

Artemis dropped her hands and gave him a smile that said she knew exactly where the "smoke" had come from. Then she came

forward a step. "What do you need to me to do?" she asked. "Since I assume you will be occupied in trying to make the Shadow Lord listen to you."

Cupressus nodded. "Shadow Lord" was the name that the Light families outside Harry's web had taken to calling him, since he was a Lord-level wizard no matter how much he tried to deny it, and he was in the shadow of evil without having quite succumbed to darkness. There was still hope of Light finding him, if he Declared the way he was supposed to. "Light the beacons," he said. "We will have to have a meeting before they accept it fully, of course, but the beacons are important."

His wife nodded, and left the room with a sharp swirl of her skirts.

Cupressus called an elf to take the Acting Minister to bed. He himself would contact the Hogwarts hospital wing and try to make Harry listen to him. Artemis would be lighting the beacons that would blaze up and down the coast of Ireland, and even be visible to the coast of Scotland, if there were still people there who would listen to them and heed the fires' message.

When those flames burned, the families who followed the Light were to put aside all petty, personal enmities, and all political commitments they might have, and all ambitions that had nothing to do with the wider world, and answer their ultimate allegiance, to their Declaration. Apollonis was one of only three families that had the right to light them, and command the others to fall in. In this case, Voldemort's attack and the Ministry's fall meant that such a moment had come.

They were the enemies of the Dark Lord, more than they were the enemies of Harry. No, Harry's undeclared status was not ideal, and Cupressus would be watching for the moment when Harry tried to take advantage of them. But they needed to ally with him to defeat Voldemort, to bring down the Dark Snake.

There would be arguments later. Cupressus knew that. The family heads would insist on getting together and drafting a formal document of alliance. And Erasmus would undoubtedly be a hindrance in the process, yet one they could not do without, not if they hoped to command the allegiance of the undeclared.

For now, though, there were no arguments. The beacons were a call to battle, and no Light wizard worth his flames would deny them.

Cupressus knelt in front of the fireplace and cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames, calling, "Hogwarts hospital wing!"

Indigena cursed as she felt Cupressus Portkey out. Yes, only one or two wizards escaping her net was not a large number, but she would have preferred that almost anyone escape save an old, experienced, canny Light wizard. Indigena had faced and fought the breed before. They inevitably caused trouble.

Then she shook her head, and closed her eyes to check the state of the rest of the Ministry. What she found satisfied her. Vines tied people to their desks. Flowers dangled in front of their faces, breathing a deep fragrance on them and lulling them almost into dreams, or at least the borderland on the edge of sleep. Tendrils held fingers motionless just short of wands. A few other Light wizards had tried spells of fire against her darlings, but they did not have the deep dedication necessary to keep raising the flames even against the dew Indigena had impregnated her plants with. They were captives, and that meant they were birds ripe for the plucking, meals for her Lord and his *absorbere* gift.

Indigena touched her Mark, and felt the pain smoldering at the bottom of it grow, until she knew her Lord understood her message. His Ministry was ready for him.

She opened her eyes, and smiled.

And then something at the bottom of the Ministry, something that could resist magic, said *No* in a decisive voice.

"Harry!"

Harry jerked his head up as Madam Pomfrey, of all people, came running into the library, her hair flying around her, her wand wildly waving. She ignored Madam Pince's glare, and Draco's, and dragged him to his feet with one hand.

"The Ministry has fallen," she hissed into his ear. "Cupressus Apollonis is calling for you in the hospital wing fireplace, offering to tell you any details you want to know." She bent even closer to Harry's ear. "He did say that the Acting Minister is safe, but

that Aurora Whitestag is dead.”

Harry felt a shock race through him as strong as the fall of the Ministry had probably caused Cupressus, but he didn't allow himself to be slowed by it. He braced his hands on the table and levered himself to his feet, shaking off the grip on his arm. He could get himself to the hospital wing faster than Madam Pomfrey could. Looking back, he collected Draco with his eyes and led him along, while he asked the matron for more information. “How many people dead?”

Madam Pomfrey frowned and shook her head. “That, I don't know. Mr. Apollonis didn't seem to think many people had died, but I didn't know why.”

Harry nodded, and simply *ran*. There were a few moving staircases that tried to get in the way, and slow him down; he simply used his magic to force them back into position so he, Draco, and the matron could jump up them. He felt a slight current of disgruntlement and discontent from Hogwarts when he did that, but the school would recover. The people who might be dying in the Ministry right now, or joining the ranks of Voldemort's captives, would not.

He raced into the hospital wing, and saw Cupressus's face hovering in the green flames. He dropped to his knees before him, so as to be sure of missing no nuance of expression. “How many are dead?” he asked.

“It is impossible to tell.” Cupressus's voice was absolutely calm. “From what I could tell, Yaxley's vines were not meant to kill, but to take and hold prisoner. If I had to guess, I would say she was taking hostages, or captives so that her Lord could drain their magic.”

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. If Indigena could turn the Ministry into a cage, then Voldemort would gain far more magic than he could from isolated disappearances and captures by the wild Dark. And even if Harry got there in time to save lives, he might not get there in time to save the captives' magic.

He pushed the thought ahead. He had to act quickly now, but it would not do to rush into a trap. “What else can you tell me?” he asked, forcing his eyes open.

“Dedicated Light-fire destroys her vines,” said Cupressus promptly. “Take someone strongly devoted to the Light with you, someone who can use spells that do not depend on the sun.” Harry nodded, thinking of Peter and the Light spells he had showed them how to do during the period when the wild Dark was terrorizing the school. “And the beacons have been lighted up and down the coast of Ireland, *vates*, by my wife. The Light families of the British Isles will know that a crisis has arisen which compels them to put aside their personal enmities and ally with you. They will doubtlessly argue later, and it will not be easy to convince them, but for now, we do not have a government, or a seat of government. This is a crisis.”

Harry swallowed. He had not absorbed the full psychological consequences of the Ministry's fall, but if some people had panicked when Voldemort had proven that he was capable of breaking into Tullianum, it would be nothing compared to what actually happened now, with the Ministry itself breached.

“Yes, it is,” he said, forcing his mind on track, to deal with what was in front of him and not what might lie beyond that. “Is there anything else that you can tell me?”

Cupressus shook his head. “I took the Acting Minister and Portkeyed out as soon as I could, so my observations were limited. I will say that simply appearing inside the Ministry strikes me as a bad idea. That is more likely to add the people who go on Voldemort's menu.”

Harry raised a hand in acknowledgment. “And how soon will the Acting Minister awaken?”

The other wizard's eyes shone with innocence. “As soon as your plans, and ours, need him to awaken, and not before.”

At least he has a good sense of how useless Juniper is. Harry nodded. “Then he should get some rest for now.” He stood, his mind already whirling. He would have to approach the Ministry from the outside. He would need to take at least one strongly Light-devoted wizard with him, and probably more. Well, Moody was here, and Ron and Ginny. He did not know if he dared ask McGonagall, given how weak her heart was, but he would search among the other professors and students, and hope to find someone else both Light-devoted and strong enough to perform the spells.

“If you can wait for five hours, there will be a contingent of Light wizards in my home,” Cupressus offered. “I will drop the wards so that you and your—Dark allies—may pass through.” The distaste in his voice was clear, but it remained brisk. “They will be strong enough, all of them, to perform the Light and the fire spells that can rid you of Yaxley's vines.”

“I do not think I can wait that long,” Harry murmured. “But I will try to send you a message if I am still battling in that time, and I will welcome your assistance.” He nodded to Cupressus again. “Is there anything else that you can think of to tell me?”

“No,” said Cupressus. “We will concentrate on gathering Light wizards and setting up a provisional government, *vates*. This battle, no matter what the outcome, cannot be allowed to spell the end of the British Ministry.”

“No, it cannot,” Harry said, and the Floo connection ended. He turned to find Draco studying him intently.

“I hope that you’re not thinking of rushing off to battle by yourself,” he said.

“No,” said Harry. “But I do need Light wizards with me, as well as Dark, and I need to think and decide what to do. It sounds as though Apparating into the Ministry won’t work, and nor will approaching it from the outside without a plan.”

He started from the hospital wing towards the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom to fetch Peter, his mind whirling.

Approach from the outside. That would mean we have to appear in the alley outside the deserted telephone box. But how to get into the Ministry from there? The approach through the Atrium or the telephone box itself will probably be wreathed with Indigena’s vines.

Well. There was one answer that Harry could count on, though he didn’t think it would allow him to Apparate into the Ministry.

Carefully, he began to think of names and faces of people he had known who worked in the Ministry, some of whom still did. He began to imagine countless other innocents who might wait there now, destined to become either Squibs or corpses if Voldemort reached them, and probably both.

Even as Draco asked questions and he answered them, even as he opened the door of the Defense Against the Dark Arts room into the middle of a third-year class and summoned Peter with a glance and a jerk of his head, he was reaching into the darkness in the middle of his mind and stirring it.

When he went to battle this time, the only thing that might suffice to easily rid the Ministry of Indigena’s vines was his deepest rage.

They brought him gently, Sylvan Yaxley’s arms closed around their Lord, supporting him and holding him so that his feet did not brush the ground. He would have said thanks for that if he were a creature of gratitude. But the Lord Voldemort was no one’s creature but his own, and so he did not stop to thank them.

The blindness of Apparition seized him, and then the more relaxed blindness of some light and physical solidity. The snake around his waist still did not see perfectly. The Lord Voldemort did not care. He could make out the succulent, tempting meals of magic around him, and he opened his *absorbere* gift and began to drain.

Already, he knew, he was the most powerful wizard in the world. With the magic he was eating now, he would become more powerful than that, a rearing, titanic force of magic that not even his heir could cope with.

In the meantime, because there was nothing wrong with his ears, he enjoyed the screams and shrieks of those suddenly rendered Squibs, and the rarer ones who realized what the disappearance of their magic would probably mean for Britain as a whole.

For the first time in a long time, laughter was rising up his throat. Let the little Light fires burn. Let the Stone in the Department of Mysteries prepare to resist him, and eat Indigena’s vines when they came near it.

Let Harry come. Let even the third come.

They would find Lord Voldemort ready for them.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Five: Two Lords That Are Deathless

Indigena cursed under her breath as she sent yet another vine forward. Until today, she wouldn’t have thought a creature existed that could disarm these vines so easily. They’d grown pincers, teeth that resembled the teeth of a sundew, dew that froze attackers

in their tracks, and maws that projected magic. They should have captured any troublesome wizards and witches who had managed to stay free so far.

But they didn't manage to capture the Stone. Instead, what happened involved the vine putting its maw around the door to the Department of Mysteries, and the Stone snipping it off.

The voice burred and laughed at her, sometimes telling her that plant magic was interesting but limited, sometimes asking her questions about how she bred the vines that Indigena didn't intend to answer. It showed no effort. That made Indigena angrier than just about anything else.

I bred these vines, I wound my magic in them, and now they cannot take something so simple as—

As a sentient piece of rock immune to magic, if the rumors Indigena had heard of the Stone were true. Well, given that set of conditions, she supposed she could not be angry about not immediately triumphing.

She closed her eyes and tried to scout through her plants that trailed through the levels just above the Department of Mysteries. It was difficult, however. Beyond a certain place, her tendrils simply withered, and the flowers that served as large blinking eyes closed as if in the face of immense cold and refused to open again. She supposed that was the Stone's way of defending its home.

It was an *annoying* way. Indigena was certain there were wizards in the Department of Mysteries with the Stone, wizards probably practiced in magic and rich with the knowledge of ancient artifacts, not to mention the artifacts themselves. Her Lord would want them. He would expect her to have the doors open already by the time he descended that far, and he might turn to punishing her if she did not succeed. Indigena was fairly certain that he would be able to do *anything* he wanted, after he had swallowed most of the magic in the Ministry.

Oh, yes, he is here. I never thought he was very interesting, but perhaps I was wrong. And he is destroying the Ministry? That is interesting.

And Indigena found herself shouldered aside very efficiently, as the Stone's consciousness lifted past her and in the direction of her Lord, filled with curiosity and intense interest.

"Can you do this, then?" Harry stared into Moon's eyes, waiting for some sign that the pale centaur was backing down, but he received none. Instead, Moon scraped a forehoof on the ground and nodded.

"Yes. We are less vulnerable to human magic than humans are. And they will not be expecting an attack from that direction." Moon put up a hand, though Harry hadn't made a motion to interrupt. "We are less vulnerable to human magic, but we are not immune. We will scout for you, and then return to you the moment we have learned the extent of what we can."

Harry nodded. That was more than fair—in fact, it was more than he would have asked of the centaurs, but Moon had insisted on offering. Harry stepped out of the way as he watched Moon use hand signals that meant nothing to Harry, but which made the herd nod and scatter in several directions. The centaurs Moon had first sent off were already coming back, clutching long spears, scythes, and clubs.

Harry had taken along several centaurs when he attacked the Ministry during his rebellion to free Hawthorn and the others from Tullianum. Though it was not widely understood how, because wizards rarely studied the magic of other species, centaurs could appear in places named after them—such as the Centaur Office in the Ministry, which had supposedly been set aside in case any of them forsook their pride enough to come and talk to Ministry officials. They would appear in the Office, scout in what ways they could, and then return to the Centaur Glade in the middle of the Forest, their most protected area.

Moon had offered it when Harry came to him, even before he could ask. That eased Harry's fears about sending them into such a dangerous situation, a little. But he didn't know what would happen to them when they arrived, if Voldemort would succeed in draining them of their magic, if Indigena would kill them with her vines. He reminded himself that none of them might return, and shivered.

A hand clasped his shoulder. "I know that look on your face," Connor's voice said into his ear. "You're worrying about what's going to happen when they get there. Don't be so concerned about them, Harry. They want to help, and they're going to. They know the risks."

Harry turned around and managed to smile at his twin. He could feel a muscle jumping in his cheek, though, and suspected it

wasn't a very calm smile. "I know that," he murmured.

"You haven't accepted that people might die, yet." Connor was holding both his shoulders now, and looking at him with a mixture of affection and exasperation. "It *happens* in war, Harry. You know that. We have to fight anyway, despite the fact that we might die, and they want to fight for you." He gave Harry a slight shake. "Don't devalue their loyalty by worrying so much."

"I will never accept that people *have* to die," said Harry quietly, and stepped out from under Connor's hands. "If I do that, my heart has been hardened, and I would not want that."

He glanced one more time at the wizards and witches gathered around him. Snape and Draco were there, of course; Harry doubted that he could have kept them away. He had attempted to call Kanerva, but had received a sighing answer only from the wind. She might appear in the middle of the battle, for all Harry knew, but he could not count on her. And Jing-Xi was still in China.

The rest of the complement with him was Light, though. McGonagall had insisted on coming, and Madam Pomfrey, when asked for her professional opinion, had allowed that she was probably recovered enough to do so. Connor had the necessary power and dedication to the Light to perform the inner fire spells, at least since their birthday, and Ron, Ginny, Moody, Tonks, Hermione, Zacharias, Parvati, and Padma waited behind him, too. Harry had been hesitant about contacting Fred and George, since he knew Indigena waited on their battlefield, and he thought the twins' eagerness to get revenge on her for Percy might overpower their good sense. In the end, though, he'd called on them. Their narrow grins didn't reassure him, but at least they hadn't attempted to Apparate into the Ministry early. They stood whispering to one another instead, apparently arguing about what painful punishment they should inflict on Indigena.

Moon reared up in front of him, catching Harry's attention again. Harry met his eyes and nodded, once, as much of a vote of confidence as he could offer when he had no idea what the centaurs were walking into. The white centaur reared high, his pale hooves and tail flying.

Between one moment and the next, he vanished, and so did the ten centaurs gathered behind him, an assemblage of chestnut and palomino and black hides. Harry sighed and folded his hands beneath his chin to wait.

This time, the one who touched his shoulder was Draco, but he didn't try to speak any comforting words. That was at least part of the reason that Harry didn't try to shake this touch off.

He was swollen, with such power.

He had never known that it was possible to drink all the magic around him. He had never tried it. The *absorbere* gift had limits. After a certain point, it would shut and force the wizard who possessed it to digest what he had eaten. The Lord Voldemort knew that better than anyone. He had been the only one who possessed the gift for years, and then, when his heir had shared it and stretched it between them, he had neither liked it nor understood its full capabilities.

But it seemed that the gift could be strengthened with exercise, like any other muscle. The Mudblood children he had drained of their power before Sylvan and Oaken took them, pounded their flesh, and introduced it into the soul-pattern growing on the floor of his home had been that practice, he understood now. He drank, and he drank, and he rarely had to shut his mouth and concentrate on settling what he'd drunk. Magic was a liquid to him, a fresh lake after he had run panting across a desert. And his belly was limitless, even as his cruelty was, even as his power was.

He laughed aloud.

A voice said, *You are interesting.*

The Lord Voldemort swung some of his attention in that direction. So swollen with magic was he that he could easily have two minds, if he wanted. One of them reached down to the eighth floor, the Atrium, and reaped the captives there of their magic; he had drained the seven floors above them. The other studied the presence that was creeping out of the Department of Mysteries, aiming for him.

It did not alarm him; he knew what it must be, since he had read his traitors' memories. Adalrico had been most eloquent in describing the Stone that had attacked Harry at Woodhouse, since he was the one who had utilized the memories to create his ward-eating stones. He knew powerful minds like this, did the Lord Voldemort. He had met his share of them, one of them lying at the foot of each Egyptian pyramid. They had been tricked into entering Earth long ago by wizards who served the pharaohs, and they resented it greatly. But they were also subject to magic, and could not hurt those who had bound them, only those who

intruded into the tombs with the intent of robbing them.

This Stone was not subject to wizards, he understood at once, because his swiftness of intelligence was too great to be fooled. It had made wizards subject to it, those it called its Unspeakables. And it reached out to him with a child's curiosity, as if it could do the same thing now.

A careless child has his fingers burned, he thought, directing the words so the Stone could hear them, and then reached out with a flare of magic, gently roasting the personality that extended towards him. He heard a startled yelp from the Stone, and then the edge of its personality retracted. The Lord Voldemort snarled in satisfaction and turned back to draining magic.

He felt the tremble of an unfamiliar presence on the edge of his consciousness, and paused to watch. He snorted with amusement when he realized centaurs had appeared in the Ministry and trotted on the fourth floor, staring at the drapery of vines around them. Harry would have sent them ahead to scout. And he would trust their reports, of course, because he had not realized that such halfbreeds were only good enough to fight in situations where humans would not do.

The Lord Voldemort thought about killing them, but then he had a better idea. They should return to his heir and report that the Ministry was dangerous but manageable, so that Harry would not hesitate, but would come ahead.

And then, once he was near, the Dark Lord, the Lord of all creation, would perform the Heir-Call again, and it would be much likelier to work this time, when Harry knew his power better and knew how many were Squibs now.

He had just nodded in satisfaction and turned back to his work when the Stone's voice said, *That was not nice*.

And time flooded the Ministry like a river turned back on itself.

Harry lifted his head sharply as the air behind him shimmered. When he turned, it was to see the Centaur Glade alight with wavering shapes. The returning centaurs, he knew, but he didn't know why they hadn't arrived as smoothly as they vanished. According to what Moon had told him, they should have.

Then the shapes hardened, and Harry could make them out. He stared, though. Several of the palomino and chestnut centaurs looked considerably younger than they had when they went to the Centaur Office, one or two foals. One black centaur had to lean on his spear, so decrepit did he seem. Only Moon looked relatively normal, and Harry could make out a few wrinkles of age around his eyes that hadn't been there before. He shook his head and fixed his eyes on Harry with an effort.

"What happened?" Harry whispered. He would have gone to them, but Draco's hand on his shoulder held him back. Harry bit his lip and forced himself to remain still, conceding that until they knew what magic had affected Moon and the others this way, it was probably stupid to touch them.

"Time," Moon whispered. "Time is loosed in the Ministry." He turned and caught his black herdmate just as he started to collapse, easing him gently to the ground. In the profound silence that had overtaken his fellow wizards when the centaurs appeared, Harry could hear the aged centaur's breath, wheezing harshly in and out of his lungs. "It struck us just as we tried to return. As you can see, it changed some of us." He gestured to the foals who were trying to heft their weapons. "I do not think it has affected their memories, for I am aged, and yet I have not lived through other years."

"Is this an enchantment of Voldemort's?" Harry demanded, his heart bounding at the very idea. If Voldemort had entered the Department of Mysteries and managed to drain some of the Stone's artifacts, of course it was perfectly possible, but the thought of facing him—except alone, where there would be no one else to suffer the effects—made Harry's heart snap in horror.

Moon shook his head. "The surge came from beneath us, but further beneath than Voldemort was."

"The Stone, then," Harry said. He wondered why it had decided to interfere in the battle. Of course, it could be something as easy as a decision to defend its home, when Indigena and Voldemort between them might well manage to down the Ministry.

Moon gave a painful nod. "Yes." Then he turned and aimed a hoof at the black centaur. "Can you drain the extra magic from him?"

Harry started and hurried forward. The centaur shivered as Harry laid hands on him, but Harry didn't know if it was from pain or the alien touch of a human wizard. He closed his eyes and began to drink, and nodded at the slightly sour, slightly salty taste in his throat. Yes, this tasted like the artifacts he had drained when the Unspeakables were hunting him. The Stone was attempting to

age Voldemort, it seemed.

Harry doubted it would work. Given the Horcruxes, Voldemort was immortal, and effectively outside the scope of normal time. But the Stone had always relied on time magic first, and perhaps did not know about the Horcruxes. It had not known about the prophecies that danced around Harry until it confronted him in the Department, after all.

Slowly, the extra years sloughed away, and the black centaur danced and kicked and stepped away from Harry with a sweeping bow. “Thank you, *vates*,” he said. “My name is Corydon, and my life is yours to call upon if you will.”

Harry nodded, then turned towards the foals. Moon shook his head, however, and moved between him and them. “The young ones must mature again,” he said. “The stars declared it long ago, when we first came in contact with those who could change us. Forward in time, into a future we did not live, we might return. But backwards in time, we must grow up with a second past.”

Harry couldn’t say that he understood that, but when he caught the newly-young centaurs’ eyes, they all nodded, so he backed off. He asked for a more detailed report, then, but there seemed to be little that Moon could tell him that they did not already know. Vines everywhere. Voldemort beneath them, draining magic. The Stone sending Time flowing through the corridors.

Voldemort a shadow of immense power. Moon had never felt the like, and though he hid the fear well, Harry could see it bubbling in the backs of his eyes. He had not known that one wizard could be that mighty, and it left him afraid for the future of his people. The centaurs had slavery or death to fear if Voldemort won, and had had it ever since they chose to ally with Harry.

They knew that, though. They allied with me knowing that. Harry forced himself to think of something other than what would probably happen to the centaurs in a dark and distant future, and wrestled his mind back to the immediate problem. *How to enter the Ministry, if the Stone is making it impossible for anyone but Voldemort, and maybe Indigena, to live there?*

They would go to the alley outside the Ministry, he decided at last, and choose from there. At the very least, they could send fire down through the telephone box shaft and try to burn Indigena’s vines, so that if the Stone retracted its magic, they would have a clear path to approach.

“Apparate to the alley outside the Ministry,” he said, raising his voice so that everyone could hear him. “If you don’t have a clear picture of it or can’t Apparate, take the arm of someone who does.” He noticed that Parvati was taking Connor’s arm, and that, after a small hesitation, Hermione had taken Zacharias’s. Harry caught every pair of eyes he could, trying to send silent strength and reassurance forth.

No one backed down. No one even really looked away, though he caught stray shivers and shudders here and there.

“Apparate,” Harry said, and closed his eyes, and leaped.

Indigena shivered as the waves of time swept over her, and all the flowers in her body closed their petals in the face of winter. An immense sleepiness had overcome her. She wanted to lie down, wrap herself in warm earth, and not wake until the winds of spring had made the air mild again.

A moment later, though, heat and an incredible energy struck—summer. Indigena shook her head and forced the weariness away, forced herself to remember that her Lord was fighting this enemy a few floors below, and might need her.

Then came the dying tints of autumn. Indigena growled under her breath. *At least I have perennials and not annuals as the basis of my being, or I might have simply withered when the time began to vary. But all these changes are still annoying.*

She fought her way against what felt like heavy air—years reversed and flowing—towards the lift shafts. Her vines had tied the lifts shut, of course, so that the people in them could not escape her Lord’s reaping, but Indigena could descend beside them, sliding from tendril to tendril.

As she slithered down between one leaf and the next, dropping like a bit of dew from a thick strand to a thin one, she felt her Lord gathering his strength like an immense maelstrom, preparing to strike at the Stone. Indigena frowned as she landed at the bottom of the shaft and opened the door. *I wonder how he will do that? The Stone is, after all, immune to magic in and of itself.*

A moment later, as she felt the magic heave and surge forward, she had her answer. Her Lord was not attacking the Stone directly, from the front, but coming around from the back and the side, dropping to the tenth level and rising up. Indigena felt the doors to the Department of Mysteries buckle, smashing open, unable to stand the tide flowing against them.

And then the Stone said, in a voice that echoed throughout the Ministry, *Now I am angry*, and the time turned to crushing cold.

Cupressus turned to look around the room, nodding to the family heads whose eyes he met. Even Tybalt Starrise, distasteful as it might seem, poor heir though he made to his mighty uncle Augustus Starrise, was there, and he met Cupressus's gaze with a raised brow and a cocky smile.

At least his Muggleborn partner was quiet, keeping his eyes cast down, as befitted someone of his heritage in a room with lines that stretched back to the dawning of wizardry in the British Isles.

As for the others, they knew what they were about, and they knew what this gathering was about. Augusta Longbottom gave Cupressus a nod. Amelia Bones avoided his eyes, since she knew that she had things to be ashamed of, but she did not stand and walk from the room. Miriam Smith raised a hand in acknowledgment when her turn came to stand subject to his gaze. Cupressus gave her a slow nod. Though the Smith family had lost in power and prestige over the years, in part because they so rarely took political advantage of their descent from Helga Hufflepuff, they remained paragons of the culture that was gone. Cupressus had always admired the way they raised their children, so that it made *sense* for their heirs to take political control at fifteen, instead of waiting two more years until the time of their greatest magic.

"Listen to me," he said, when he thought he had examined the faces of everyone who mattered, and the room quieted at once. Augusta Longbottom leaned forward. The rest of them showed various signs of listening, which contented Cupressus. They would demonstrate their attention more clearly in a short time.

"The Ministry has all but fallen," he said bluntly. "Indigena Yaxley's vines have, by now, made meals of most of those in the building, or held them as meals for her Lord. I rescued the Acting Minister, but many others—our friends, our family, and those who made decisions—are dead or gone. The Wizengamot was not meeting today, or the whole of the wizarding government in Britain might have perished."

"What about Aurora Whitestag?" Augusta asked. Cupressus knew she had been in contact with Aurora, since she had often written the Ministry in the last few months about rights for half-human wizards and witches.

"She is dead," Cupressus answered. "The first victim of Indigena, if the wards I set were correct." And no one in this room, he knew, would question if they were correct. "That means that either we have no government, or we have tatters built on the backs of Acting Minister Juniper and the Wizengamot, or—" And he cocked his head and waited for someone else to come to the obvious conclusion.

Amelia Bones, of all people, was the one who found words for it. Of course, she had always been quick to leap to conclusions where Harry was concerned, Cupressus thought, with pardonable cynicism. "Or we have a government built in alliance with the *vates*, and on the shoulders of the Light."

"Not just in alliance with the *vates*," said Cupressus. "Working as equal partners with him. We have the Acting Minister still. We need not make Harry our Minister, our leader. What matters is that we show a strong, guiding hand to bring wizarding Britain through this crisis."

"Always thinking of the future," Miriam Smith murmured from her corner.

Cupressus nodded to her. The words were a private joke between them, remnants of a time long ago when a violent political disagreement between their families had been turned aside by his words. "Yes. And we will need it. I do not think that Harry can rescue the Ministry. I saw the vines. There were too many of them, and the attack happened too suddenly. If more than a few other wizards escaped, then I will be surprised. I nearly did not as it was."

"Where is the Acting Minister now?" Tybalt Starrise asked, his head cocked and his foot bouncing. Cupressus was impressed to see his partner lay his hand on his arm in restraint. *Perhaps that one is not so bad an addition to the councils of the Light after all.*

"In a guest room of my home," Cupressus said evenly. "Resting comfortably. Sleeping off smoke damage, in fact."

He could see the opinions darting through the eyes around him. They knew what he really meant. And they were considering whether it would be worth it to wake Erasmus and demand that he hear what was happening. Some of them might think they could better manipulate Erasmus than Cupressus, which was certainly true.

Cupressus waited. This was the first test. If they gave in to the temptation to achieve personal political goals, they would demand that he wake the Acting Minister. If they did not, if they cared more about the future of Britain as a whole and what they might build in concert with the Dark wizards and Harry, they would let him sleep.

“Why interrupt his well-earned rest?” Miriam Smith murmured. “Let him sleep.”

“Let him,” said Augusta.

“Let him,” echoed half a dozen other voices.

Cupressus inclined his head, the only visible acknowledgment he intended to give, but in secret, he was immensely proud of the other wizards and witches around him. They had put aside the goals that might have divided them, and they were going to pool their strength instead of wielding it against each other. He doubted Dark wizards could have done as much.

A spark of loneliness shone in the back of his mind, as always in situations like this. *Ignifer should be here, standing beside me, to see this. She was my true heir.*

He smothered the spark with the ease of long practice, and nodded to Miriam Smith. “Such an effort as we plan to make must involve the cooperation of Ireland and Britain. What say you, my lady, to being the British representative of the alliance, while I am the Irish one?”

Sylvan Yaxley cried out as his hands began to freeze. Oaken replaced him, while Sylvan shook off the cold in the other world, but the Lord Voldemort knew they must trade places again, and soon. The twins were invulnerable to most human spells and curses, the magic of the wizarding world, but this winter rising up through the Ministry now was not from the wizarding world. It came from another place, one similar to that where one twin always hid, and it could not be denied, hidden from, or transcended for very long.

It would have frozen his Indigena, too.

But it could not whelm Lord Voldemort, especially not now that he had broken the doors of the Department of Mysteries and was flowing into his enemy’s stronghold, feeling the sharp sparks and spears and spines of magic all around him, debating which ones he wanted to swallow.

The Unspeakables dashed out, ready to defend their master. The bindings connecting them to the Stone were truly impressive. The Lord Voldemort studied them in admiration. When he built his Death Eaters again—when he decided that he needed sworn companions—he would adapt some of the vows that the Stone had invented, and use them on his own people.

But they were mortal still, and armed with artifacts enchanted by ordinary wizards, and Lord Voldemort was not mortal and not an ordinary wizard. He swallowed their magic without a pause, and since it was their magic that bound them to the Stone, they halted in confusion.

The cold grew worse. Lord Voldemort laughed aloud. He could feel the Stone’s strange innocence. It worked its experiments, even the ones that other humans would consider horrible, in the spirit of pure knowledge. That was all it wanted from the prisoners brought into its domain, from the artifacts it collected, from the Unspeakables who swore to it. Simply to know, to demarcate the boundaries of and *learn* those subjects it found interesting.

It did not know evil.

He did.

Lord Voldemort turned his magic to memory, and sent every current of his being that had invaded the Department of Mysteries to carry images of the things *he* had done, in the pursuit of knowledge. He showed the Stone the bones he had removed from living flesh, and the joy he had taken as he watched blood spill over his hands, and knew another life destroyed. He showed the Stone the branches of magic he had learned in the heart of India, knowledge that even its own practitioners had declared too dangerous to have at the last. Pain, there was pain, and he had caused agony even when he was fairly certain of the answer to his researches, for to cause pain was joy.

The Stone connected his blood-soaked tortures to its own blood-soaked tortures, and recoiled in confusion. Had it done that, as well? Had its actions been evil in the eyes of those who watched it, immoral?

Lord Voldemort laughed, and laughed, and laughed. The Stone was retreating before him, pulling its cold into itself as it considered this new perspective. The Stone was immortal, immune to magic, but there were only two lords that were deathless here, Death and he. He had spurned Death, he had defied it, and in a moment he would show the Stone how.

And then the moment had come, because on the upper edge of the Ministry he felt his heir arrive.

Monika would have attended earlier to the shrill alarm ringing from her pool that tracked the activity of Lord Riddle and Harry, but she had been elbows-deep in birthing fluid, trying to make sure the crossbred *ovantula* survived the half-whale child she was giving birth to. As soon as she could, she hurried to the pool, washing her arms clean, and watching the images that formed between trailing lines of blood and dark purple gore.

The image showed only abstract pictures, a swelling cloud of dark glory facing a tiny, gray spark.

Monika straightened. *This is it. This is the moment when the final battle comes. It must be. Lord Riddle has attained his highest level of power.*

She hurried to fetch the items she would need to interfere in the battle anonymously. She would need to be swift, and invisible, or else the Pact would notice and condemn her for violating boundaries. But the Pact also tended to live with what had happened. If she succeeded, they would grumble and scold, but would not offer her actual violence.

Monika smiled a bit. *How could they offer me actual violence? If I succeed, I will be the most powerful witch in the world.*

“Oh, but I expected she would do something like this.”

The calm words cut through Pamela’s swearing, and she turned her head to see Alexandre approaching the prophecy-pool. A swirl of gold curled above his shoulder, and Pamela eyed it and stepped out of the way. She had never liked being near an active prophecy. It tried to bend all the people around it to fulfill it. She was free-willed, thank you, and believed in free will, not in fate.

“You *expected* it?” Pamela demanded. “How, when we know that Harry threatened her with death if she didn’t stay out of Britain?”

Alexandre waved a hand, his eyes intent on the pool. “Monika always has thought she can surpass the limits. She would believe that she was not about to be caught even if she saw the Pact Lords and Ladies bellowing on her trail. Rules do not apply to her that apply to others. And if she can manage to transfer Harry’s magic into herself, she may even be right. Certainly the Pact would not dare to touch her then, and she could command the curses and the creatures that Harry may have set on her.”

“I still don’t see how you could have foreseen this exact sequence of events,” Pamela murmured, stepping back from the prophecy-pool. She felt itchy, wanting to do something, but, of course, if she intervened, that would be just as bad as what Monika was doing. Sometimes she hated that she had chosen Light when it came time to Declare.

Alexandre touched the active prophecy beside his shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

“You’re *kidding*,” said Pamela, staring.

He made a little moue at her. “I do wish you wouldn’t be so undignified,” he murmured, kneeling. “A Light Lady should be a bit more formal, and I wish that you respected the rules, Seeaborn.”

“There’s a prophecy that predicted this?” Pamela demanded, kneeling next to him.

“Just so.” Alexandre apparently found the pool much more interesting to look at.

“And what are we supposed to do about it?”

He turned a lazy smile on her. “The prophecy predicted that, too.” He reached his hand into the pool, his arm vanishing to the elbow. “And, as it happens, there are many different fates alive in Britain right now, and I am a friend to prophecies.”

The Stone had already recovered from its shock. Now that it was alive to the differences in moral and immoral actions, it wanted to know more about them. The Lord Voldemort could feel the deep coil of its interest rising like the tide, trying to learn more about him and make him stay in one place so that it could do so.

He had already drained most of the artifacts in the Department of Mysteries, though, and the majority of his attention was on the surface, where his heir was waiting, vulnerable and unsuspecting. How *could* he suspect, when the Dark Lord was more powerful than any Lord that had ever lived?

Carefully, he Apparated Sylvan, Oaken, and Indigena to safety. He would have liked for them to be here to see his triumph, but the cold had disabled Indigena completely, and Sylvan and Oaken, though powerful, were not Lord-level wizards. They would not understand much of what was happening.

Then he tugged on the vines that ran throughout the Ministry. His level of understanding of them did not matter. That Indigena was the one who had bred them did not matter. What mattered was the level of his magic. Magic more than compensated for missing knowledge.

The vines sank more deeply into the stone at his command, and trembled, and writhed, and dug their roots in. And then they began to pull, and the pulling made the walls of the Ministry sway and crack.

The Ministry was full of Squibs now, people whose magic he had reaped. The Lord Voldemort needed it no longer.

He did three things simultaneously then. He rose, moving his body out of danger in an Apparition to the surface.

He reached out and began the Heir-Call, pulling powerfully on Harry, commanding his heir to come to his side.

And he commanded the vines to bring the Ministry down, stone after stone, wall after wall, in a collapse and a roar of rubble on the head of the Stone and its Unspeakables and the newly-made Squibs.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Six: Taken and Snared As a Prey

Harry felt caught between a ringing bell and a stabbing sword. The twinge in his head was the ringing bell. The voice was the stabbing sword, chanting his obligation to Voldemort over and over again.

And now Voldemort had appeared on the surface, his voice roaring in laughter, the shadow of his power sweeping the sky like the death of hope. Harry could feel the hunger of his open gullet. He'd drained the magic of everyone in the Ministry, it seemed, but he would be more than happy to make a meal of the wizards and witches who had come with Harry.

And Harry could not *help* them because of this stupid Heir-Call.

Before he could decide what to do, the deserted telephone box collapsed into its own shaft. Harry lifted his head, blinking away the tears of pain, and tried to determine what had caused that. A vine rose in answer from the hole, a flower on the end that waved like a hand, the petals opening and closing before they dived back into the ground. Harry heard the cracking and rending, then, which could mean only one thing.

He's bringing the Ministry down.

And, doubtless, all the people in there whom Voldemort had drained hadn't managed to escape before he did it.

Harry lunged forward, his own magic blazing around him. The Heir-Call dropped him before he'd run two steps. He heard the continual cracking in front of him, but he could hardly see anything through his tears, hardly move between the pain in his lungs and the hammer that felt poised to smash his skull open.

But he *had* to. He had to save those who couldn't save themselves. If his magic couldn't do that, what good was it?

When the voice began its chant again, Harry replied in the words that would defeat the Heir-Call, refusing to let himself be cowed or think about the consequences that might follow this. "I deny the claim. I am legal heir of the Black line, and now I bind myself to that family of my own free will. My name is Harry Black, and Tom Marvolo Riddle has no claim on me."

The pain vanished so suddenly that Harry was left in the middle of what felt like an immense silence, though he knew it wasn't. His own gasps tore his lungs, now.

But that meant he was free to do what needed to be done.

He rose, his magic and his rage already stirring like ropes around him, aiming to reach down the lift shaft and stabilize the Ministry.

The Lord Voldemort was displeased. *Very* displeased. He had not imagined that his heir, usually so stubborn, would choose *now* to give in and be difficult about the claim that his Lord did have on him, and had had on him since that fateful night in Godric's Hollow. Briefly, he considered reaching out to the third.

Then he disdained the idea. Far better to save that for a moment when Harry could concentrate on it, and would collapse in perfect despair. For now, Harry was too concerned about the dying Squibs to notice anything else.

Of course, the Lord Voldemort could always increase his despair over this event. Not for nothing was he called the Dark Lord. Dark his heart, and dark his power, and dark his vows, and dark his glee when he saw someone else unable to do that which was most important in the world to them.

So he struck Harry with his magic. He had grown mighty; it barely needed a thought to bind Harry's limbs, or to mimic the vines that Indigena had once bred for him and declare that his wandless magic could not fly beyond a certain limit from his body. Harry tumbled to the ground like an ice statue, though the Lord Voldemort knew it was his heart and not his body that would shatter when he landed. He leaned back and prepared to watch, disregarding the rushing of the wizards and witches beyond Harry. *They* did not matter, not when none of them would know how to hurt him if the solution pranced in front of them.

Harry screamed, but only in his head; his voice seemed to have ended, too. He threw himself against his bonds again and again, his anger increasing each time, fury spreading over his mind like a cloud. He *had* to do something. This wasn't like the graveyard, where he had stayed helpless while the werewolves devoured a little boy. That was when Voldemort had the power of Midsummer behind him. This time, he did not—it was no significant day, not even Midwinter—and so that meant that Harry should fulfill his duty and *defeat him*.

But the bonds did not yield for all Harry's desperate reasoning. He called up his magic and pulled on the tunnel that connected it to Voldemort, and still it did not increase. The bonds themselves seemed to hold his magic separate from Voldemort's for now, as in a glass cage.

The hole in the ground roared, and then the stones around the place where the telephone box had stood began to crumble and sway and drop into the gap. Dust swirled in the air, blanketing the exact circumstances from Harry's sight, but he had ears, and they told him well enough what was happening.

The Ministry was collapsing. He heard stone shrieking, iron buckling, wood snapping and groaning under the intense pressure—or maybe those were people shrieking, skulls buckling, bones snapping and groaning. His own yells obscured some of the more delicate distinctions between sounds. He had never pulled as hard, never strained as hard, as he did against the bonds. He *had* to get free. Or he *had* to wake and find that this was a bad dream, that Voldemort hadn't really managed to destroy the Ministry and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives inside it.

But he did not wake, and the sounds went on rising from the hole. Groan and snap and buckle and shatter, and the Ministry fell and fell, and still Harry was on the lip of the hole with the bonds of magic wreathed tight around him, with Voldemort laughing in his ears.

Voldemort laughing.

Harry turned to face him. He was a crouched white shape to the left of Harry, a short distance from the pit, leaning forward. Whether he had a snake around his waist, concealed in the folds of his flowing robe, or whether his magic saw for him, Harry did not know, and did not care. It was obvious that his enemy was savoring his expression, whichever way he took it in.

Harry had a moment where even the fact of death in front of him seemed less important than their observation of one another.

And then he fell over the edge into hatred.

Minerva stepped carefully away from the rest of the children, though her instincts shouted at her to stay near them in case a spell should strike. She didn't think they would move. They stood still with fascinated horror—all but Draco Malfoy, who strained against a wall of magic that wouldn't let him dart forward and aid Harry. But no one was paying attention to her, even when she drew her wand and leveled it at Voldemort.

She knew she might die. There was a deep calm in the middle of her that accepted that possibility. But at least she wouldn't die on a bed in the hospital wing, swallowing potions and complaining about the taste of them to Poppy. She knew that Poppy wouldn't understand her determination not to do that. But then, Poppy had never been a Gryffindor, had never known that intense longing to die on her feet.

Severus, at least, was watching her. Minerva would recognize that burning gaze on her back anywhere.

Harry pulled and writhed in midair, screaming in a voice from which the sanity had gone. Minerva did not know how Voldemort was holding him, but it obviously involved magic, and it had obviously been effective. It had kept him from diving into the Ministry to save anyone.

The Ministry. All those poor people—

Minerva put the thought from her head. She had to think about the here and now, the way she had after the Children's Massacre when she'd carefully taken the Muggleborn children, still living, down from their crosses. That had been Evan Rosier's work, but it had been done on the orders of his master. And now that master was in front of her, and she had a chance to make a difference against him, but not if she lost herself in mourning.

A distraction. That was all she could be against a wizard whose power brooded fit to crush her mind, but that might be all she needed to be, when Harry danced on the edge of breaking free.

She Transfigured Voldemort's left foot into a rat. There came a pained squeal from under his robe, and then the rat bit his leg in the desperate scramble for light and air. Minerva smiled. She knew that spell well. It had disabled more than one Death Eater, in the days when she was still fighting them.

Those days of the First War seemed almost innocent, considering what lay before them now.

Voldemort turned his attention to her. Minerva stared into his face, a bit surprised to find herself almost fearless. She could feel his magic, yes, but what she saw was his eyes, burned and destroyed by the venom of the Many cobras. Harry had been the one to execute that plan when he was fifteen. No matter how hard he struggled, Voldemort kept losing to a teenage boy.

And Minerva was sure that the same thing would happen now.

Even as Voldemort's magic sought and found her weakness, even as the crushing pain in her heart began, she felt magic travel past her like snapped rope, and knew that Harry was free. And she could imagine the anger and the brewing hatred that he would bear, having heard more than a thousand people die.

Harry threw the hatred directly into Voldemort's face.

Monika was wise enough to land a long way from the battle. Though she doubted the Muggles knew what was going on, and even some weaker wizards and witches would only shiver and complain of a coldness in the air, any Lord or Lady would feel the immense amounts of power being tossed about. By the feel of it, the scent of it, Lord Riddle had reaped more than a thousand wizards and witches.

Monika stood there for a moment with a smile on her face, her eyes closed. *How wonderful it must be to have the absorbere gift. He enacts the dominance that the rest of us only dream of. The rest of the world is his prey, and when he is not stopped by interfering children or prophecies, they know it.*

She shook herself out of her preoccupation, and knelt down to place the small silver statues she'd enchanted on the ground. The

first was a perfect replica of Lord Riddle, with the information she'd discovered about his childhood carved on it. That had not been easy to come by, but it was worth paying spies in Britain itself and observing Harry's movements. A journey he'd taken to an insignificant orphanage had yielded a treasure trove of information.

The second statue represented Harry, and Monika had managed to carve far more information on that one, because Harry was more open about himself. Monika shook her head sadly. She would have advised him not to be, but, of course, after today, he wouldn't be in a state to listen to her advice.

The air around her turned cold and dark with power. Monika paused, cocking her head. It seemed that Harry had broken free of Riddle's hold and was wheeling against him. Monika shook her head again. Under the circumstances, it was as ridiculous as a dog attacking an elephant. He would never survive, save for her interference, and he should know that. He should have fled, forsaken the dead and worked to save the living. She was a bit surprised that he could so give up his own principles.

She turned back to her work, pulling the tapeworm that would feed her Harry's magic from her robe pocket. She let it coil around the silver statue of Harry for now. She could not send it *into* him until Harry had both survived the battle and imbibed the magic. Her task was to make that a bit easier.

The second creature she drew out had taken her some time and effort to breed. She knew as much about snakes as any other living creature, but Lord Riddle was a Parselmouth, which had changed her calculations and made the first serpents she created not strong enough. She touched the small head of the jade serpent now and whispered instructions to it, crooning love and praise. The little snake yawned, patches of gold fluttering on her head, fangs extending from her upper lip. Monika knelt and wound her about Lord Riddle's statue, where she would stay until the moment Monika told her to strike.

Then she stepped back and looked up at the sky, the swirling gray clouds that Muggle would call bad weather and she knew were power.

"Don't worry, Harry," she murmured. "Auntie Monika's coming to rescue you. And then drain you, but, of course, one can't have everything."

Harry had never hated so much.

He wanted Voldemort to *suffer*. He had always disdained torture, because it put off the deaths of enemies who could cause more trouble in the meantime, and it was often used as misplaced vengeance. And he had feared the impulse that he had sometimes found in himself, to revel in pain.

Now he reveled in it. And he fully saw why some other people wanted their enemies to suffer. But no one, he was sure, had ever deserved it as much as Voldemort.

The moment he was free of the bonds, thanks to Voldemort's distraction, he lunged at him and began to tear, ripping magic from him like strips of flesh, pulling it to himself and winding it into his being. The technique he had learned when he was studying Parseltongue magic, to divide his *absorbere* gift into many small snakes and set them on his target from several different directions, he used now, but he had as many as thirty snakes moving all around Voldemort, taking any magic they could and channeling it directly back to Harry. He could control them, when he would never have dared anything like this when he was facing Slytherin, because his anger made it impossible for him to seek a lesser punishment.

The magic that flowed him into came from people drained and murdered, used as sources for their magic. The paths of their lives were ended now, and what they might have been, wonderful or evil or helpful to others or merely the cause of amusement and a smile once a day, would never be known.

That *maddened* Harry.

He ran around and around his magical parent. He could feel Voldemort's amusement, now that he had recovered from his indignation at having his foot transformed into a rat. Voldemort was strong, and Harry was small. All he had to do was crush Harry.

If he can catch me.

Harry was small, but he was quick. And he had a natural visualization for speed, here in this world of the imagination where what you imagined yourself doing was what mattered: flight on a broomstick. He thought of himself as swooping around Voldemort,

chasing a Snitch which was vengeance for the dead, and he drained magic again and again, because Voldemort just thought of him as an annoyance and not a threat.

In fact, Voldemort was laughing again. And Harry saw a hole in his defenses, a relaxation that he should never have shown.

In a flash, Harry pounced and closed his little snakes' teeth on the magic revealed through that hole; he reached out and captured the elusive Snitch of power that he'd wanted to catch.

The hole opened almost straight to Voldemort's magical core, the remnant of a tunnel he'd placed to allow the swallowed magic easy access. It was one thing that made him powerful.

And Harry ripped it straight out of him.

The Lord Voldemort lost his amusement again.

His heir should know better. He should have given up. He should have come to the Heir-Call, and let his Lord have him. It was what he *must* do, since his power was shared, his life was a gift, and his principles had not prevented such numerous and savage deaths.

He was not supposed to lock his serpents' teeth on what felt like a nerve, and in reality was a pure shred of power, and tug it away from him.

The Lord Voldemort staggered, and watched as the magic coiled around his heir's body, traveling down the tunnel, sticking closely to the boy as if that was where it had always intended to end up. He opened his mouth to scream, which would be followed by an attack so spectacular that Harry would have to give up.

And then someone else screamed, and his sight briefly fled as a claw traveled down the middle of his forehead, marking and scarring the skin. Blood flowed into his eyes, which pure balls of power had begun to regenerate. No magic could repair the effects of the Many cobras' poison, but it could grow brand-new eyes if enough power was concentrated in the right place.

In the moment of his distraction, Harry seized another shred of power, and then attacked the Lord Voldemort's body itself, trying to tear apart his midriff under the robe he wore—and the robe was not fine enough for the most powerful wizard in the world; he would have to see about getting something better.

Shaking the blood off, the Lord Voldemort saw a bird wheeling in front of him with a lizard's tail, claws on its wings, teeth in its beak. It screamed at him, and this time wheeled in to trail a talon across his right hand, opening a wound there, too. Coming a second time, its screech had the sound of satisfaction.

The Lord Voldemort ignored it for now. This bird was the representative of the connection between himself and his heir, and of course it would favor Harry, because magic was supposed to flow in one direction, not the other. But that didn't mean that it would give Harry the victory in this battle, and he could not allow it to distract him from winning.

He was going to win.

He could simply let his titanic power fall on Harry, crushing him out of existence, but he preferred not to do that; he might lose some of the magic that lived in Harry himself, that power he'd been born with. And the Lord Voldemort wanted it all. Harry was his most precious meal, if he could not become his most precious pawn and toy.

He might still be a pawn and a toy. He had resisted the Heir-Call, but the Lord Voldemort could feel the hatred coming from his heir's direction. He had fallen into loathing, abandoned his soul, and thus his principles, for the sheer chance to attack.

And he still had the scar on his forehead.

The Lord Voldemort began to perform the same spell that had enslaved his traitorous children to him again, the spell that depended on the hatred living in a person's soul and a mark that connected him or her to the Dark Lord.

Connor didn't *care* that Snape was trying to make them all stay still, or that Parvati was holding on to his arm hard enough to cut

off the blood flowing to his hand. He *had* to go and check that Headmistress McGonagall was all right. She had just crumpled to the ground after casting that Transfiguration spell at Voldemort, and it wasn't right that she was lying there all by herself, without anyone to check on her health.

He took a step forward, and dragged Parvati with him. "Where are you going?" she yelled, leaning close to his ear to do it.

Connor winced. *She doesn't need to yell that loud.* The noises of cracking and crashing from the Ministry—well, where the Ministry had been—had retreated far underground now, and no more stones showed a sign of crumbling into the hole from the alley itself.

Except that—well, there was something else in the air. Connor supposed it was the sheer pressure from two competing, fighting Lord-level wizards. He could not really hear the magic, but his ears constantly popped, and it raced along his skin like rasping claws. It felt like the silence just before or after an immense storm. There was the temptation to shout, even though the silence that received their words still sounded like silence.

"To help McGonagall!" he shouted back. "Come with me if you're coming!"

Parvati, luckily, decided that she was no coward and would join him, so she set her feet and came with him. It felt like bearing into a wind, Connor thought, which made it all the more confusing to feel only still air against their faces.

He did pause on the way there to watch a shallow, bleeding wound appear across Voldemort's left hand. He shook his head. Was Harry causing that? Why didn't he strike harder than that?

Of course, maybe that was as hard as he could strike. Maybe he had tried, and he couldn't do anything else.

Connor shivered, and turned his attention back to McGonagall. She lay curled around her heart, in a position that should have made her seem frail and helpless. But she wasn't. She had fallen like a lioness, and if she was dead, Connor knew, she had died like a Gryffindor.

Was she dead, though? Connor didn't know. He crouched down beside her, one eye on Voldemort, his ears alive to the eerie stillness of the air that spoke of rushing power somewhere just beyond his hearing, and turned the Headmistress over, prying at the hold she had on her heart.

Her hands fell limp when he tugged hard enough. Her face was still, her lips nearly blue. But Connor thought he could see the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat even now, and that meant he could probably save her life, and that he had a duty to save it.

He took a deep breath, concentrating on his most recent Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons, and told Parvati, "Keep watch." She tossed him a dirty look—she was already standing over him with her wand out—but Connor didn't stop to reassure her or listen to any complaints she might have.

Peter's voice sounded in his head, calm and decisive, telling him what to do if he found someone almost dead and wounded, in need of immediate assistance. *Perform the Life Jolt Spell if you can. It gives them enough of a shock to bring them back to consciousness, sometimes, and gives them enough adrenaline to reach shelter.*

Connor was unsure if it would work with someone who appeared to have had a heart attack, but he didn't care. He had no better ideas, so he placed his wand above the Headmistress's heart and spoke the spell, enunciating the first word carefully, just the way Peter had taught them. "*Vexatio vitae!*"

McGonagall gasped, and then began to cough. Connor felt the magic travel into her as a golden pulse a moment later, and he grabbed her hands as her eyes fluttered open, slinging her arms around his neck. "Come on," he whispered, hoping his voice was properly soothing, but also conveyed urgency. "Come with me. We have to get you to safety."

She limped with him towards the others. Professor Snape was striding out to help them by then, and Connor willingly handed her over. He could feel Parvati's pride at his back, and his heart was beating with pride of its own.

Then he turned, to see if he could aid his brother.

Harry knew he was drowning in his hatred, but he could not help it.

He loathed Voldemort with a coldness that startled him, that went deeper into him than bone or magic could go. The emotion was as cold as steel in the middle of a winter day, plates of metal that had replaced his blood. How could he have done that? How could he have brought down the Ministry on the heads of thousands of helpless people? That was the refrain that beat through and around Harry's pulse.

And thus he felt the hatred beginning to settle around him as chains, thanks to agony centered in his scar.

He tried to fight back, but Voldemort gave him, gleefully, the image of a witch cowering as he tore her magic away and then the ceiling above her began to sway and creak, and Harry was lost again. If he did not hate someone who had done that, then what was he?

On the other hand, if he let Voldemort take him and use him as a weapon against his allies, then what was he but a liability who should be destroyed?

He tried to shore up the defenses of his mind, reaching for his love of Connor and Draco and Snape, and Voldemort promptly struck at his weakened walls. He still had all that magic to use, and though his power would grow unimaginably great if he could manage to add Harry's magic to it, it was just on the edge of imaginably great right now.

Harry's thoughts sprang lightly among options. If he could create a trap that would draw Voldemort in, and hold him there while he did something that would kill himself—

But there he ran up against the walls of prophecy again, because if he had to be alive to fight and kill Voldemort, he could not commit suicide.

He was rapidly approaching the place where he would cause more harm alive than dead, though, the tipping point he had once warned Joseph about. Harry hated the choice that lay before him, but he feared that he must make it, while he was still sane enough and free enough of Voldemort's influence to make it at all.

Alexandre carried them through the prophecy-pool into the brooding gray air above Muggle London. Pamela was not quite sure if they were physically present, traveling through the pool in the way that Alexandre traveled secure in the arms of a failed prophecy, or if this was merely an extremely realistic image, but she felt air whistling along the sides of her face and ruffling her hair. That was realistic enough for her, she thought.

"Where is Monika?" she asked.

Alexandre turned his head, following the course of no magic visible to her. Pamela clutched the edge of the pool as the vision swooped up and down the streets of London, feeling a bit dizzy. She didn't want to fall in, just in case it was real and she did lose her life on concrete and cobblestones.

"There," said Alexandre suddenly, and pointed towards a corner. The vision obligingly stooped closer, and, sure enough, Pamela could make out Monika, crouched over what looked like a pair of statues twined with snakes, and now and then checking the sky for signals that Pamela couldn't see any more than she could see the clues Alexandre was following.

"She's trying to use sympathetic magic," Alexandre said clinically. "She'll open a hole in Tom's magical core, I would suspect, and let Harry defeat him, temporarily. Then she'll drain Harry's magic with that tapeworm she has." He shrugged when Pamela stared at him. "Yes, it will take almost all her magic, and if she leaps into the battle like that, she stands a high chance of getting killed. But it's a way to get around the fact that Tom still has Horcruxes she doesn't know about. Technically, he would still be alive, but she would destroy him by depriving him of magic. And she would utterly destroy Harry, of course, once she didn't need him as a conduit to pass the magic along."

"She's mad," said Pamela quietly, eyes fixed on the woman who knelt in the midst of her own blowing black hair.

"To challenge a prophecy? Quite so." Alexandre turned to smile at her, and Pamela was a little stunned at the brightness of his face. Of course, he was in the midst of a place where fate ran incredibly high, and perhaps that revitalized him as few things could have done. "I wish you could see prophecies, Seaborn. They fill the air here like birds-of-paradise. And this one is especially happy to be in the company of others of its kind." He sighed longingly and touched the shimmer of yellow above his shoulder. "For permission to visit Britain, when the prophecies are in season!"

“Shouldn’t you do something soon?” Pamela demanded. Monika had begun to touch the statues and chant words under her breath, words that didn’t sound like either Latin or German. Pamela thought they might be Gothic, an old language that some wizards had refashioned as a magical tongue before Latin took over.

“The prophecy will tell us to wait for the right moment,” Alexandre murmured, tilting his head to the side. “Unfortunately, I can do nothing to aid Harry in his battle against Lord Riddle. I am here only to stop Monika.” He sat up, his eyes wide and his nostrils flaring. “And the moment for that is—*now*.”

Pamela did not expect him to grab her hand and force her to participate in the bolt of white lightning he hurled at Monika.

Draco did not know what exactly was happening. To his eyes, Harry simply writhed from side to side, staring at Voldemort the entire time, and Voldemort stared back. He could feel tides of magic sloshing back and forth over his head, but to try to comprehend them would crush his brain. If Harry needed him, he could not tell. It was all very frustrating.

But there was a brain nearby that could comprehend them.

Draco closed his eyes and jumped into Harry’s brain. It was the mind he knew best, besides his own, and over the years since he had acquired the possession gift, he had become adept at slipping in without a ripple, or he would not have dared to interfere in the middle of a battle so important.

What he found appalled him. Harry was struggling against guilt and hatred caused by the myriad deaths in the Ministry, deaths he felt responsible for, because he could have broken free of Voldemort’s hold and saved them in time—he thought. If his power could not save lives, what good was it?

And from there, what Voldemort was doing was all too apparent. Harry hated him, much as he had that night on the Astronomy Tower when Scrimgeour had been assassinated. Voldemort had Harry on chains and was reeling him in.

Draco dared not possess Harry, not when it would involve distraction and magic that he did not know how to wield with the same instinctive control as Harry. He could do nothing but remind him of love.

He spread shimmering images of their joining rituals throughout Harry’s brain: that first Walpurgis with its nervous dance, the July ritual when they had seen the Light and Darkness in each other’s souls, the Halloween when Harry had finally yielded to some of the barriers breaking in himself, the Imbolc when Harry had shown that he fought like a tree, the Walpurgis when Harry had taken the lead, the July when Harry had come into his power and his knowledge of Draco’s virtues at the same moment, and Halloween, this Halloween, when Draco had finally seen some signs that his lover actually *lusted* after him.

All were wonderful. All were symbols of their lives together. And, Draco asked in silence as he dug at the memories and sent them to the surface of Harry’s mind, would he really give everything they had survived together up for the chance of getting revenge on Voldemort? He knew better than that. He had taught his allies better than that, in fact. He should know better, and come with Draco.

Harry paused, hovering, the chains on his mind melting as Draco’s influence began to strike through the gloom in his thoughts.

And then Voldemort decided to attack Draco’s body.

Monika reeled, and a shriek exploded from her throat. She could not help screaming. She had never expected a lightning bolt to launch from the sky just during the most delicate part of the spell and melt the silver figurines she had molded to take the places of Lord Riddle and Harry.

She stood, eyes narrowed, searching the air. When she found who had done this—

The people who had done this were gazing down at her from a hole just above her. One of them was not a surprise; Pamela Seaborn had disliked Monika for decades, and Monika returned the favor with interest. But Alexandre rarely acted against anyone in the Pact, and that he would do so when Monika was a Dark Lady, as he was a Dark Lord, was doubly surprising.

“You have crossed the line of the Pact’s acceptable interference,” said Alexandre calmly. “You have come to another Lord’s country uninvited—in fact, against his command to keep out—and you would have taken his magic from him if you could.” He

appeared careless of the battle that swirled behind him, never looking away from her. “Let us tell them, Monika, and you will never have a chance to fight before the rest of them blast you out of existence. They would have accepted your interference if you had succeeded, doubtless, but you didn’t.”

Monika bared her teeth. What Alexandre said was true enough. But—

“Harry is not a Lord,” she said. It was the technicality that she had counted on, if worst came to worst, to keep her from savage punishment. Yes, a Lord had the right to keep all other Lords and Ladies out of his country, but Harry had not Declared and had not claimed the title that would give him that right.

“He is accepted as such by the Pact, until they decide what else to do with him.” Alexandre gave her a lazy smile. “And the others will take revenge on you, especially since you tried to attack him in the middle of a battle with a Lord they don’t want to face themselves, unless...” He let the offer dangle.

Monika bared her teeth. *Bastard*. He was going to blackmail her, of course. It was what Monika would have done in his place. But that did not mean that she enjoyed being in this position any more. “What do you want?”

“You will *stay* out of Britain for the duration of this crisis,” said Alexandre. “In fact, you will accept an Unassailable Curse from me that will hurt you if you come within a hundred miles of the island’s shores. Also, you will give me the unicorns that I know you have captured.”

Monika clenched her hands. “What do you want with them?”

“That isn’t important to you.” Alexandre smiled at her. “Just imagine what Coatlicue will do with this information, Monika. What *Elena* will do. She has been waiting for an excuse to hurt you for some time, you know. She does not forgive insults easily.”

The Dark Lady of Peru was not a threat that Monika needed to be handed right now, she thought grumpily. But it was also an effective one. Elena was slaving to get her hands on Monika’s blood, and had been ever since Monika had stolen some valuable magical artifacts from under her nose and escaped punishment on a technicality. She would urge the Pact to demand death.

“I accept your terms,” she said grudgingly.

“Good,” said Alexandre, and dropped into the incantation of the Unassailable Curse. Monika eyed the slagged remains of her silver statues with regret in the few moments before she Apparated away.

It was a good plan.

The Lord Voldemort was so far from pleased that he could see over the edge into true anger and disgust. His heir was not behaving as he should. And now he was remembering love too easily, a sure sign that his interfering lover rode with him. That meant the lover was not in his body, though, and so the Dark Lord could much more easily hurt the young Malfoy.

He made a feint in that direction, and Harry, unsurprisingly, sent a charging wave of magic to get between him and the body. The wave manifested as a snarling creature, half snake and half lion, singing with a phoenix’s voice. The Lord Voldemort was tired of such antics, however, and destroyed the creature with a single blow.

The phoenix voice was the only thing he could not destroy. It went on ringing, rising from the air midway between the Lord Voldemort and Malfoy’s body, sending cascades of Light into his brain. He hovered, waiting for it to be finished, building his strength as he did so. He would strike when Harry’s magic wearied, as it must, or when Harry actually had the audacity to believe that he had driven his magical parent away from attacking.

Then sight was gone.

The Lord Voldemort’s first belief was that Harry had found a way to blind him again, perhaps by draining the magic that had gathered in his eye-sockets. But then he felt cold around him, cold more profound than Harry could summon even in the midst of rage, and he knew what this was.

You promised me that I could have his soul, the voice of the wild Dark screamed in his mind. *You were to take his magic alone. But now I find you trying to take soul and body and magic and all. I will not have it. His voice is beautiful, and the one who sings like a phoenix is mine! In soul*, it added conscientiously.

The Lord Voldemort held very still. He could feel the wild Dark stalking all around him, mantichore paws rising and falling in patterns that imitated those forming in the middle of the blood-and-flesh design on the floor of his home. The bad thing about encouraging its fascination with Harry, he decided, was that it then thought of Harry as its possession. And the wild Dark was very protective of its possessions, until the moment when it decided it didn't want them any more.

Midwinter, the wild Dark decided. *You can have his magic at Midwinter. For now, go home, little snake.*

And the Lord Voldemort found himself flung spiraling after his Death Eaters, his magic unbraiding behind him as Harry lunged at the exact same moment, sank snake fangs in, and hung on, helpless, impotent rage filling him.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He stood on the ground outside the immense hole that had been the Ministry with Draco in his arms. His own magic had increased enough to snap at the air around him. His phoenix song still warbled from his throat, low and rusty, but loud enough to make the point.

Voldemort was gone. And not far away stood the wild Dark in the form of a mantichore, with an enchanted look on its face.

It paced towards him. Harry stared up at it, but didn't stop singing. He knew his voice was probably what had attracted the wild Dark in the first place, and the only thing keeping them safe.

Well. For some version of "safe."

The wild Dark lowered its scorpion tail and caressed the side of Harry's face with the sting. Harry tried not to think about what would happen if the tail moved just a little and sank through his cheek, or if the wild Dark grew bored and began attacking the people with him. He kept singing, and the sting fell down and rested in the hollow of his throat.

Midwinter, said the wild Dark, in a voice that played his bones like gongs. *Midwinter is when I shall have you, to sing for me like a caged bird. Until then, little one, sing on.*

It was gone, then, and Harry could see the others, shivering and rubbing their arms, alive with gooseflesh. Draco blinked and pushed against his arms, letting Harry know he'd returned to his body. Only then did Harry feel free to stop singing, and to step away and let Draco stand on his own.

"Voldemort's gone?" Padma whispered, as if she couldn't believe it.

Harry nodded in silence, and looked at the hole where the Ministry had been. Now that he had the ability to do so, he let his magic range into it, looking for some sign that someone had survived it.

Nothing. Silence. No one. All had died when the walls and the ceilings fell on them. Voldemort would have made sure of that, of course, not wanting anyone to be spared, even for further torment later. He knew it would hurt Harry more if everyone perished.

"Voldemort's gone," he said, and his voice was hoarse and raspy and sounded like a dying cricket's. "But this cannot, in any sense, be called a victory."

The Ministry was gone, he thought as he turned away from the hole. The foundation of wizarding government, the greatest guarantee of stability in their world, had been smashed, and Voldemort still had most of the magic he'd managed to reap from the people who worked there.

And Midwinter was a month away.

Harry lifted his shoulders against the darkness, because someone had to do so. The suicidal part of himself was shut in a small cage and would have to remain there, for now. He didn't have the time to deal with it.

"Back to Hogwarts," he commanded, and after a look at his face, no one questioned him, or even tried to approach him. Harry stood alone at the edge of the hole for a moment, his head bowed.

He could still hear the walls snapping like bones, if he listened.

He could still feel the wild Dark's scorpion sting on his cheek.

He Apparated.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Seven: In the Wake of Wildness

Rita had not expected to be summoned, especially not with the amulet that she'd given Harry so long ago. Why would he call her now? There was so much to be done, since she'd seen the dust swirling up from the Ministry and received at least that much confirmation that a major attack had taken place. She needed to buzz about the ruins and interview survivors. She didn't need to Apparate to Hogwarts and then fly up to the Astronomy Tower, which was the only place the wards would permit her to approach in her Animagus form.

Her mind changed when she landed and saw Harry waiting for her, though. His face was imperious, shut, behind the marks of tears. That meant something *enormous* had happened. He was preparing to send a public statement to the press and the wizarding world, Rita understood then, not only the article she had envisioned. She changed back to human, sitting on the battlements, and took out her quill and her parchment without even asking what it was about.

"The Ministry has fallen," Harry said.

Rita had always imagined she would immediately write down any such momentous news, but instead her quill froze, because she could not believe what Harry had said was true. It *had* to be wrong, didn't it? The Minister might be dead, there might have been an attack by Death Eaters that left a hundred people killed or wounded, but the Ministry could not have *fallen*.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She was pleased that her voice did not shake. At least part of her fantasies of what would happen when she wrote down the most shattering story of her career was intact.

"I mean that the Ministry has fallen." Harry had two people at his shoulders, one a dark-haired young wizard Rita had seen before, one a golden-haired witch she didn't know as well, who glared at her as if she should be imprisoned for daring to question their leader. Harry himself didn't waver. He just looked her in the face and repeated that impossible news again. "I mean that the wizarding government is homeless now, though the Acting Minister escaped alive, and since the Wizengamot did not meet today, any of its members not in the building at the time of the collapse also still live. But Voldemort brought the building down. It has fallen. I searched, with my magic, for anyone other than the Acting Minister who might have escaped." He took a deep breath. "There were no survivors."

"How many dead?" Rita whispered. She had begun to write, but she felt almost as if her hand were part of another body, detached from her, while her ears remained to listen.

"In the high hundreds at least," said Harry. "Perhaps as many as a thousand. I didn't count them. I was more interested in whether or not someone lived in the rubble." He shook his head. "And no one did."

"How am I going to spin this?" Rita resisted the urge to throw one hand up in the air, because that would just be silly. "I can't just—I can't go to the *Prophet* and print a story this bleak without some factor to mitigate its bleakness."

Harry raised an eyebrow and stepped towards her. Rita found herself mesmerized by the depth of his eyes. Of course, looking back later, she wasn't sure she saw the strength in them that she imagined there. It could easily have been that she saw what she needed to see, what she wanted to see.

"I have absolute faith in you," Harry told her. "If anyone can make a story like this sound less bleak, you can. While still telling the truth, of course." A small smile curled his mouth. "Didn't you say that you wanted to tell the truth and look good while doing it, Rita?"

He still remembers. She'd expressed the ambition to him more than three years ago, and so was slightly surprised that he did. But—well, perhaps he had people to remember it for him. As powerful as he'd become, Rita wouldn't be surprised.

"You think I can?" she said.

"I *know* that you can." Harry tilted his head. "I've seen you rescue the wizarding world from impossible situations before. Words are your playthings. You can do this, Rita, and I know it, or I would have called on someone else, or just waited for people to discover this themselves." He raised an eyebrow. "It's not as though I don't have other things I could be doing."

Rita nodded in reluctant admission, and sat up. “Now, tell me all the details that you can remember.”

Harry did. Rita had to admit it sounded more and more horrible the more she heard, but that didn’t *have* to matter. Words were her playthings, just like Harry said. If anyone could make this into a message of bracing hope for the wizarding world—here is the worst, now get ready for worse still—she could.

It must be done. So she would do it.

Erasmus wondered what sort of joke they thought they were playing on him. He knew that Cupressus had been a little more disagreeable lately, a little quicker to ask him questions that should not be asked, a little prone to stare from the corner of an eye when he should have both eyes on his work, but surely this was beyond even his capabilities.

“The Ministry cannot be *gone*,” he told Cupressus. He was sitting in a room in the middle of the man’s house, but that meant nothing. Of course Cupressus had had to rescue him from Yaxley’s vines. He did not have to lie about the Ministry’s collapse.

“It is,” said Cupressus, his face absolutely closed. “Harry firecalled me not ten minutes ago. It was reduced to rubble. Everyone still in it died. We should be grateful that I was able to rescue you, sir, and that the Wizengamot did not meet today. We shall need everyone still alive to handle the panic and the psychological wound that Voldemort just dealt our world.”

“Of course Harry would tell you something like that.” Erasmus stood up. He’d felt a little faint when Cupressus rescued him. Smoke damage, Cupressus said, though Erasmus couldn’t remember a fire. “You can’t trust him, Cupressus. He wants to knock us down and replace us.”

Cupressus closed his eyes. Erasmus supposed it must be to admire his intense wisdom, and kick himself for not seeing Harry’s plans. But when Erasmus started to move towards the door, Cupressus interposed himself between.

“Sir,” he said. He sounded as if he were speaking through gritted teeth. *Why?* “It really is imperative that you stay here until you can realize the magnitude of the situation.”

“I do,” said Erasmus impatiently. *One would think that he wanted Harry to gain control of the wizarding world, the way he’s acting.*

A horrible suspicion blossomed in his gut at that, but he had to put it aside. The oaths Cupressus had sworn when he became part of the Order of the Firebird would not let him act against the Light.

“You do not.”

Cupressus took a step forward. Erasmus stared. Somehow—if he knew how, he would have used the trick himself—the old man had become an impressive wizard between one moment and the next, his magic giving him the shadow of wings, a blaze of Light working through his eyes and his mouth. His hand clutching his wand seemed to hold an instrument of doom. Erasmus eyed it nervously, more than aware now that he didn’t know where his own wand was.

“The Ministry is gone,” said Cupressus. “Fallen. Harry would not lie about something that could be contradicted so easily. You may use any fireplace in my home to learn the truth. Try to firecall your office, Minister, or the Department of Mysteries. They are *dead*. We must live in a world where our Minister acknowledges that, or by Merlin himself, I will *Oblivate* you, and you will say what I tell you to say.”

“You cannot.” Erasmus felt very calm now. He knew where he was: alone in the midst of enemies. It was a familiar position. “The Light would destroy you if you lifted a hand against me.”

“I have always served the Light.” Cupressus inclined his head. “And I know that the Light is larger than any single wizard’s ambitions. It will not stop me if I do what I do for the good of the wizarding world. And I am sure that I do, sir. Try to firecall, since that seems to be the only thing that will convince you.” And he turned and swept out of the room before Erasmus could question him further.

Erasmus shook his head and stepped out when he was sure Cupressus was gone, glancing cautiously in several directions. No one awaited him, however. Through an open door across the hallway, he could see a fireplace, and a bowl on the mantle that held Floo powder. Hesitantly, he went to it and cast a handful into the flames. They turned green.

Then he told himself not to hesitate. Cupressus's story was fable. Anyone could see that. "Minister's office!" he called, and tried to stick his head in.

He could not. A solid obstruction pushed back against him. When his eyes cleared a bit, he could make out stone and wood, a corner of his desk that had once stood near the far wall, the edges of slipping metal. The rubble started to lean towards him with a groan, as if eager to make room for itself.

Erasmus hastily popped back out. Then he shut the Floo connection, and gazed at the fireplace for a long time.

That was only one room. My office. They could have collapsed it to make me believe their mad story.

Thus reassured, he firecalled the Auror Office. He would have some answers, or he would call on the Aurors to raid Cupressus's home and remove him from the man's "protective" custody.

There was stone there, too. And wood. And the stink of death. And only silence to answer his calls.

Cupressus strode back into the room where Miriam Smith awaited him, shaking his head. The others had returned to their homes after Harry's firecall describing the state of things at the Ministry. They knew they would be needed to calm the panic and spread the word in a carefully controlled way—and they probably needed some time and distance to recover themselves, Cupressus knew.

He didn't need it himself. And neither did Miriam, for the same reason, as he knew when he looked into her eyes. She knew, as he did, that the Light burned most fiercely in a time of deepest Darkness. This was the kind of hour that all true Light wizards prayed to be alive in.

They *mattered*, and would matter, to the world after this. And Harry had shown his worth in contacting them. If he was not an ally that could be trusted, he was close to it. Cupressus intended to work with him even more closely in the future.

"He's awake?" Miriam asked.

Cupressus returned to the source of his irritation. No matter how much they might matter to the world in the future, they had an obstacle in front of them now: what to do with the Acting Minister. "Yes," he said shortly. "And he refuses to believe that the Ministry was destroyed. I told him to firecall the various Departments and see if he received any answer. Even that will take some time to convince him. And then, of course, he will be prone to taking more importance on himself."

"We cannot let him have that," said Miriam. "We will build the government on our backs, and not his. It was a mistake ever to sit so stunned that we let power pass into his hands."

"I know it." Cupressus wasn't surprised by anything she was saying. They were the same thoughts that had passed through his head. "And what would you suggest?"

"Play on his fears." Miriam shrugged. "It's true that some people will want to kill him; once they find out he's still alive, he'll be a major target for the forces of You-Know-Who. And he needs to make public appearances without saying anything of substance. Urge him to remain in your house, compose speeches, and leave small and petty things up to us. He'll like that."

"It's deception," Cupressus felt compelled to say, because it was. And deception was not a tool of the Light.

"Deception in a greater cause." Miriam gave him a long look. "Unless you think our world can stand to have him at the helm right now."

Cupressus had to shake his head. Perhaps this was partly their punishment for allowing Juniper power at all, that they needed to deal with him now, and even use lies to do so. The Light would provide, and the Light would tell them if it disapproved so strongly as for their behavior to require correction. That was the good thing about serving the Light, and having defined rules and standards. One knew what one did wrong, and what one did right, and did not have to live with the chaos "defined" by the wild Dark.

"We will make our world right again," he said. "We will fight and win against Voldemort."

"We will." Miriam clasped his hand, and then turned to Apparate home. She had her own burdens to worry about, Cupressus

knew, as the leader of the British part of the Light alliance. For one thing, the enmities in Britain against Harry ran deeper than those in Ireland, and for another, the closest wizard the British Light purebloods had had to a leader, Augustus Starrise, was long since fallen. She had not taken on an easy task.

But Cupressus was certain she could accomplish it, because there was no other choice.

He stood looking out his own window for a moment, relishing the thought of rallying the Irish Light purebloods, and felt an emptiness at his side. For a moment, he expected to turn and see Ignifer standing there, his perfect heir. She had been so devoted to the Light before she Declared for the Dark.

But that is done with. And while we may be comrades-in-arms now, we cannot ever be father and daughter again.

Cupressus began his duties. It was how he steadied the round of his days, how he knew who he was, even in the wake of the devastating attack on the Ministry.

Remus listened to the howls riding back and forth across London. The packs sang to each other this way, exchanging news and messages and information via a complicated code that no human ear, even a wizard's, could discern the differences in. Right now, of course, the messages all talked of the Ministry's fall.

Remus could make out shadows of ambition there, too. Some werewolves would think that, with the Ministry's oppressive structure destroyed, the time had come to demand full rights from wizards. There was no Tullianum to swallow them if they didn't obey the laws, now, no Aurors to arrest them.

"Hail, brother."

He turned. Peregrine hesitated on the threshold of his pack's safehouse, her nostrils moving, until Remus nodded that she was welcome. Then she relaxed and padded forward, sitting down next to him and fixing him with an intent stare.

"What side do you stand on?" she asked. "With the wizards or against them?"

Remus smiled wryly. "Some werewolves have accused me of being more wizard than wolf," he answered. "But I see the cause of wizards and werewolves as being in common in this war. At least they know of magic's existence, and some of us do use wands and care about affairs in their world. Now is the time to ally with them—demanding respect and treatment as equals, of course, but not taking advantage of their weakness to take more than that. If we do, their world will be slower to recover, and the benefits and blessings that the more violent ones are dreaming of won't come to them anyway."

Peregrine nodded. "I have already thought of that. And if someone objects, and tries to lead their packs in a different direction?"

"Good luck to them," said Remus indifferently, "if they do not interfere with me and mine, or with Harry's cause. But I think they will interfere."

"And?" Peregrine sat up, tension radiating from her body. Remus could see his pack members shying away. They probably thought a fight between the two alphas was imminent. Remus didn't think so. Peregrine knew sense when she smelled it.

"Then they are welcome to fight me." Remus didn't have to project an air of quiet confidence this time. He really felt it. Since winning the fight against Blackbird, and then surviving Hawthorn's attack when she'd been in wild werewolf form, he'd become far more confident in his own body and his own powers. Few werewolves were his equals, whatever they might assume. "I'll beat them down and set them up again at the head of packs that follow our common welfare."

Peregrine smiled, carefully concealing her teeth so that Remus wouldn't take it for a snarl and attack. "Me, as well."

Remus nodded solemnly, and put out his hand, deliberately resorting to the human gesture before the werewolf one, which called for him to rub his cheeks with Peregrine's and receive reassurance from her calm scent. She both shook hands and rubbed cheeks, telling him that she believed in their citizenship in both worlds even as he did.

There would be packs who disagreed. The werewolves who wanted rights in the human world didn't understand, sometimes, that they had to make contributions to that human world and have a stake in its survival in order to receive any rights.

Remus would make them see sense, if he had to sit on all of them. This battle with Voldemort would be hard enough. Harry didn't

need rogue packs biting Muggles in random numbers and holding equally random riots against wizards at the most inconvenient times.

It is very bad, Griselda told herself. But it could have been so much worse.

She thought that if she kept saying that, even in the privacy of her own head, she might come to believe it was true.

The *hanarz* had summoned her the moment the Ministry began to fall, and Griselda had arrived in time to see the end of the battle between Voldemort and Harry. Then the southern goblins had gone into the rubble of the Ministry, trusting to their superior skills in the tunnels to save their lives if the stone and wood started to shift, searching for survivors.

They had found none, and given the songs the *hanarz* had sent into the stone, which she said came back empty, there were none to be found.

So many people gone. So many people Griselda had known, so many she had fought and argued with, so many she had passed in the hallways every time she went to Courtroom Ten for a meeting of the Wizengamot. The loss was incalculable, as was the way it had changed the balance of the war.

For now. I am sure there are people already attempting to calculate it.

The Acting Minister had escaped. They could establish a temporary Ministry. But Griselda knew it would not have the force of authority in many minds that needed a building and an office and all the trappings in order to think power was solid. They would have rebellions, arguments, and people joining Voldemort out of sheer terror of his power. They would have people who wanted to hold an election in the middle of war, people whose devotion to their principles outweighed their devotion to reality.

So preoccupied was she that she didn't notice, at first, the *hanarz* trying to get her attention. When she did, she shook her head and apologized. The goblins had suffered enough ignorance from wizards throughout their long history together. Turning away from one now was a deep insult.

The *hanarz* ignored that, though she would not have ignored the lack of an apology, Griselda knew. "We can compel attention to you, and forestall panic," she said. "At least, panic for anyone who has their money in Gringotts."

Griselda blinked and stood a little straighter. They were in one of the underground chambers of the bank, not far from the tunnels that had once led to the Ministry. *Get used to thinking in past tense. It will make the loss easier to bear.* "Do you think it's wise to involve your people in this, *hanarz*?"

"We are already involved." The *hanarz* spread her hands slightly. "We stepped into politics with the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and the *vates* will be fighting the Dark Lord. What is power if it is saved and stored underground like silver unmined? It must not lie in stone any longer. We can rise. We will cut off access to the vaults for anyone who seems intent on joining the Dark Lord. We will give limited monies to those who cause trouble for the *vates*. There is no Ministry law to seize assets for the Ministry any longer, but we can deny financial independence to those who would work against us."

Griselda realized, then, how much really *had* changed. Yes, the Ministry was gone, and the southern goblins no longer needed to operate in its shadow. They could reveal how much strength they truly had, because there was no organized force that could punish them, and when they revealed their reasons, most people, to object, would have to admit their contrary allegiances aloud.

"If you are sure that it will not involve danger to your people," Griselda said, one final time.

"There is danger." The *hanarz's* teeth and chains both gleamed when she smiled. "But we have the arrows to meet it."

Griselda nodded, and began to feel the first stirrings of a plan in her own head. *I can help them. I can be their spokesperson, as well as join the new Wizengamot when it forms. Perhaps I am not much more than a figurehead in a battle such as this—I am too old to truly fight—but, by Merlin, I can be the most excellent figurehead that there is, and somewhat compensate for Juniper's dead weight.*

The truth was written in the stars. Every young centaur knew that. What they did not understand, what it took them years to understand as they rose from foals, was the many kinds of truth inscribed there. That on which Mars shone was not the same as

that marked by Orion, and of course a comet introduced many doubts and ambiguities that had taken celebrated astronomers decades to work out.

But the astronomers had worked it out long since, mapped the movements of the sky, and while events changed on earth, the stars and the planets, the moon and the sun, and all the other dancers of the heavens marked out the relations of those changes to what had come before. They were continuity. They united future and past and present, and they permitted the leaders of herds to act in ways that blind humans would never understand.

Such were the thoughts that ran through Moon's head as he stood on a rise in the Forest and looked up at the bright stars. Yes, they spoke of troubles still to come, perhaps even ones that would cost them the *vates*, and certainly ones that would cost some of his people their lives.

That did not matter. They had sworn. That swearing was in the stars, and so was the outcome. If they could not yet read it, they had once read outcomes like it, and the centaurs had survived those. So long as one of their kind lived on earth, there was a continuation for them. And so long as the stars shone, the knowledge could not truly die.

Moon turned and cantered towards the Glade. His people were waiting for him, spears and scythes in their hands.

"Polaris shines," he said.

They bowed their heads and all sank to one knee, less in awe of him than the message he carried, the truth he conveyed. Moon looked up again, at the bright North Star, shining free even as the clouds raced about it.

He brought one hoof down sternly. Polaris shone, and its path changed the least of any star in the sky. The message was clear.

Humans might imagine eternity all they liked. Centaurs knew it.

Minerva was convinced that Poppy must have poured half the potions in the hospital wing down her throat by now. She coughed on the latest one, a particularly foul-tasting liquid that seemed inclined to make her forget her heart attack by burning her throat, and thrust out a hand.

"That is *enough*," she said. "I am Headmistress of this school, and I say that you must stop."

Poppy eyed her and snorted, unimpressed. "You almost died," she said tartly, and reached for another vial.

"You can't command me—" Minerva started.

"You will *die* if you go into battle again."

Minerva blinked, and leaned back against her pillows. That certainly hadn't been what she thought she would hear.

"Go on," she said.

"Your heart has been too strained." Poppy clutched the potion vial to herself as if she were speaking of the end of the world, but her words were those Minerva used with the slowest students in Transfiguration, the ones who could not grasp the simplest of spells even when they saw the incantation demonstrated multiple times. "You could have a heart attack now from the sheer stress and excitement of battle. And there won't always be someone nearby to use the Life Jolt and bring you back to your feet."

Minerva studied her in silence. Then she said, "And if I say that this is a risk I understand and accept?"

Poppy clenched her hands around the vial. "You should ask yourself if the contribution you can make in battle is worth depriving Hogwarts of its Headmistress."

Life had certainly been easier when she was Dumbledore's Deputy Headmistress, Minerva thought grumpily to herself. Much as she hated it, she doubted most people would trust Severus to assume the post of Deputy Headmaster and lead the school in her place.

"I suppose not," she said.

Poppy curved her hand around her ear in sheer annoying parody. Minerva knew the matron had heard what she said. She shook her head and leaned back against the pillow. “I suppose not,” she repeated. “I will stay behind in case of battle. Though I do wonder what will happen if the time comes when paperwork will do no good, and my wand is needed.”

“Trust someone else to tell you when those times are,” said Poppy darkly, coming to her and pouring the potion down her throat before Minerva could object. “Don’t trust your own judgment.”

Minerva would have protested the unfairness of this, but the potion was apparently enchanted to travel straight to her stomach, and to cut off consciousness as soon as it reached there. Her eyes closed, and if Poppy continued to scold her, she never heard the words.

Millicent rose to her feet, one hand clutched around the side of a crystalline stone ring. The rock resembled quartz, but the ring had come out of the vault of Bulstrode treasures, so it was almost certainly something rarer. Millicent hadn’t cared to find out. What mattered was that this was the ring that her ancestors had used to join courting couples for centuries on end.

Pierre Delacour held the other side of the ring and looked at her anxiously across it.

“If I gave up my name,” said Millicent simply, “it would mean the extinction of the direct line of the Bulstrode family. I have a cousin in France who may be able to take up the burden of carrying our legacy, but I consider her an unworthy heir for any but the most extreme circumstances. Meanwhile, you have numerous cousins and siblings and other relatives who can carry on the name of Delacour. Will you do me the honor, Pierre, of becoming Pierre Bulstrode?”

From the calm expression on his face, he’d expected this, and wasn’t even particularly upset. Perhaps he wasn’t attached to the Delacour name. He nodded. “I will accept your name, my wife.”

“Good.” Millicent stepped forward and bent over the ring, kissing him. It was a hard kiss, stony—a good kiss for a Bulstrode marriage to begin with, she thought. Pierre’s relatives, gathered solemnly about them in this underground chamber beneath the Bulstrode home, burst into applause.

Millicent nodded to them and joined hands with Pierre, the crystalline stone ring now encircling both their wrists, binding them together as one. Cousins and aunts and Pierre’s parents came forward to offer their congratulations. Millicent felt a pulse of regret that Elfrida could not be here to see her daughter get married, but she and Marian had already transformed into statues in another Bulstrode vault, charmed against aging and warded with curses.

Besides, Bulstrodes didn’t do sentiment. Millicent wished that Elfrida could have been here more for her mother’s sake than her own. She was not born to the hard, proud traditions that Adalrico had valued and taught his daughter and heir.

Pierre looked at her now and then with trepidation, but with no diminishing in the adoration of his gaze. Millicent was glad of that. All she needed was a husband who thought only of romance and didn’t focus on the practical difficulties and advantages of getting married in a time of war.

As soon as the last relative had kissed her and wrung Pierre’s hand and exclaimed over the both of them, Millicent nodded to them and took up the Portkey that would bear them to the house’s inner bedroom. The world blurred, and then Pierre was sitting down hard on the side of the bed, staring around at the dark walls and the shrouded portraits that hung on them. The portraits were motionless, rather than the more common wizarding pictures that hung elsewhere in the house. It was thought that Bulstrode ancestors should be with their descendants on the wedding nights, but there was no need for them to actually watch the consummation, Millicent thought as she put the Portkey away. They could be there in spirit, and it was still just as meaningful.

“Millicent?”

“Yes?” She undid the black ribbons binding her hair—a mixture of mourning and a concession to the finery of the occasion—and sat down next to Pierre, removing the ring from their wrists at last. It had burned both their wrists, painlessly on Pierre’s part, with pain on hers. But the agony had been so small compared to anything she’d had to bear in recent months, she’d barely noticed it.

Pierre put up his hands, clasped hers, and kissed their interlocking fingers. “I promise to be a good husband to you,” he said. “And a good Bulstrode. And a good father of the heir that you will carry in your belly after this night.”

Millicent relaxed. She had been afraid, given his reaction to the wedding—

But that was silly of her. He would not have agreed to marry her if he didn't find strength attractive. Besides, even if she had been wrong about him, it was too late to go back now. Bulstrodes didn't divorce, because of centuries in which the option hadn't existed. They put down their heads and endured.

Now, she kissed him back, on the lips, and then pushed him gently flat on the bed, and began the process of both knowing her husband and securing their future, in the form of the heir she *would* carry after this. The fertility spells and charms she'd cast on herself were not about to fail.

Parvati spoke calmly to her parents through the hospital wing fireplace. She couldn't deny their right to be worried, after what they had heard about the Ministry, but she thought it almost funny that they *were* so worried when she hadn't been one of the people caught in that wrack.

"Yes, Mother, I'm fine, actually. So is Padma. We never even got a chance to fight. It was all Lord-level wizardry, no spells." She sighed at the thought of it. Was it any wonder that people became discouraged about what they could contribute to this war, when it was Harry and the wild Dark fighting Voldemort half the time? "Except Connor using a spell to save the Headmistress's life, of course."

Sita's eyes were wide and pleading. "Parvati, are you sure that you and your sister won't consider coming home?"

"Not yet, Mother." Parvati sat back from the fireplace, winding a curl of hair around her finger. "It's simply not possible, not with what we want to be and do. How could we leave our lovers in danger while we fled to safety?" She ignored Sita's wince at the mention of "lovers." Her parents obviously still hadn't recovered from the list Parvati and Padma had sent them of their "activities" that proved the strict definition of virginity, at least, no longer applied to them.

"But if they love you, they would want you to be safe." Sita leaned forward. "We want you to be safe, and we love you. They also love you. Why wouldn't they want you to be safe?"

Parvati laughed a little. "Well, most of the time you might have a point, Mother. But Luna doesn't regard safety in the same way most people do, and Connor wants me there so I can fight *beside* him." She felt a little thrill in her stomach at the thought. Her boyfriend wasn't someone whose sense of self-worth came from protecting other people so much as relying on them. She had always thought that Harry would make a horrible boyfriend in that respect. "Even if I can't fight in every battle, I can help defend the school, and teach other people spells, and heal the wounded as they fall on the field. That's what I want to do. This is what I want to be. And people who love others can also be happy when those others find something they want to do."

"It's very hard for us to put up with this, Parvati," Sita whispered. "Please, please understand that."

"I do," said Parvati. "But, equally, it's hard for me and Padma to put up with being protected all the time. Please understand that."

Sita closed her eyes, and didn't reply. A moment later, the Floo connection closed.

Parvati shrugged and rose to her feet. They were in for some hard times, doubtless, now that the Ministry had fallen. But they would fight through them, and survive as best as they could, and help others in the doing so. That was what life was all about.

Harry had called everyone to Hogwarts who could come: those Aurors not absolutely needed to defend the safehouses, Kanerva, Laura Gloryflower and her contingent of artificial winged horses and their riders, Augusta Longbottom, and those allies and families of his allies not already living in the school. They needed to make plans. He had already compiled a list of wizarding villages in order of vulnerability, which depended on their size, their wards, their locations, and the number of their defenders, among other things. Most would be evacuated, with many people going to France, and some going to Ireland, which would be a stopping place in transition to, of all countries, Iceland. But the Icelandic wizards had offered, via a snowy owl that had arrived after what looked like a nonstop flight, and Harry was hardly going to resist the offer or ask if they were sure.

Not now.

He'd spoken with at least one person from each village, eased them past the immediate panicky transition when they wanted to scream and run in circles over the Ministry's fall, and made them listen to his plans for evacuation, or vanishing into a safehouse where they didn't want to leave Britain. They'd mostly listened to him. A few were still screaming. Harry would leave them for the morning.

He'd given the word to those who had not heard it, by firecall or phoenix song communication spell where he could, by owl where he must, and directed Skeeter to do the best she could with the news. Not everyone would listen. Some people would blame him. He would have to live with that as it came down, just as he would have to live with the certain attempts to sabotage the new coalition government. Some of them would come from Juniper.

In one corner of his mind, the guilt burned like acid, and it seemed to have dripped down to the deepest corners of his being.

But there was no time for open mourning, just as there was no time for extensive coddling of any one person. Harry had to treat them like responsible adults and rely on them for those things they should be able to do. For the most part, they had responded to the treatment well, even seeming to draw confidence from it, as if his belief in them made it so.

But that acid was there, dripping. Harry had never so much wished for his emotionless training back.

He didn't know what was going to happen tomorrow. He didn't know how soon Voldemort, irritated by the wild Dark and maddened by Harry's escape from him, would strike. He didn't know how much magic was left to Voldemort, either.

He opened his bedroom door, and found Draco sitting on their bed, waiting for him. Harry paused, staring at him.

Draco stared back.

Then he opened his arms.

Harry swallowed, twice, only to find that he couldn't speak any more. Carefully, he crept to Draco and laid his head on his shoulder, closing his eyes. He had thought he would cry when he had the time, but so many tears had built up that it seemed he couldn't shed a single one. He just lay there, dry-eyed, in the one place and with the one person whom he could trust to support him.

Draco lay back, stroking his hair and saying nothing.

At some point, the acid ceased to drip, and Harry fled from thoughts of death and defeat and responsibility and killing himself into sleep.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Eight: Hawthorn's Dream

What he had to do now, Harry told himself, was stay very, very sane. That way, he would not go either enraged or mad when someone spoke to him the way Snape had just spoken to him now.

"I chose the name Black because I meant to if I was ever cornered," he said calmly now. He was very calm. It helped that they stood in Snape's office, where he had spent many happy and *serene* hours brewing potions. "Had I had longer to think, I'm not sure what I would have chosen. Perhaps none."

"And why did Regulus's name come to you first in a dangerous situation?" Snape demanded.

Harry stared at him. *He's—jealous?*

From the glint in Snape's dark eyes, that was the problem. Harry decided not to let on that he'd noticed. It was such a ridiculous thing to be jealous of that he wouldn't know how to respond if Snape demanded a response.

"It was the name of the family, rather than the man," he said. "After all, that was Sirius's surname, too, and I felt anything but safe around him in the last months of his life." He didn't let the words truly sink into his brain. He had all the guilt and all the longing to die he could handle. "I'm already Regulus's legal heir, and I've been sheltered and protected—and sheltered and protected my people, too—in the Black houses. So that was a matter of practicality, and my short-term plan. I would have liked to make the choice more freely. That's not what happened, though." He hesitated, then said it because it had to be said. "Please, sir, don't scold me for this. I need you too much for other things."

Snape left the subject, but reached out and captured his chin in one hand, tilting his face up. Harry held his breath as he felt the Legilimency gently skim the surface of his thoughts. *Please don't notice, please don't notice...*

“I am one of your refuges in this, then?” Snape looked guardedly pleased.

That, I don't mind him seeing. Harry nodded. “You and Draco, sir. Connor, too, to an extent, but I'm not sure he understands why I blame myself for the Ministry. You both do. Please know that you'll always be important in my life.”

He hoped that would content Snape. He only had so much energy to parcel out, and giving Snape and Draco the majority of it, while proper, left him drained of energy with which to reassure others.

“And your other refuge?”

Shit. “What other refuge?” Harry thought he could play dumb. Snape might simply be trying to trick him into admitting more. It didn't mean he'd actually seen anything in Harry's mind.

“There is a thought of a third place to hide in your mind, a third thing that strengthens you, though I cannot make out its nature.” Snape's eyes had gone hooded, but still pierced him like the fang of a viper. “I want to know what it is.”

Harry hesitated again, torn between his promise not to lie to Draco and Snape about his emotions, and the fact that he would face disapproval of his spoke the truth. Then he sighed. “It doesn't mean that I'll do it,” he said. “I know I can't. And it doesn't involve suppressing my emotions. It just involves—thinking about what I would do if I was a different person, had a different life.”

“*What is it, Harry.*” Snape did not make it a question, and his voice sounded deep, rather than angry.

“Just—thoughts of death.” Harry shrugged, then rushed on while Snape stared at him. “I *know* I can't die. All the people I love, all the promises I made, the fight against Voldemort, all demand that I stay alive. I *know* that. But if I were a different person, and I felt as guilty as I do now, I could kill myself and get it over with. Sacrifice my life for a Horcrux, for example. That's *all*. I promise. It's just something I like to think about. Not something I would actually do.”

Snape said nothing. Harry relaxed, bit by bit. He might be able to think of nothing to say.

He might actually understand.

Harry hoped for that. He knew the difference between fantasy and reality. He knew he couldn't kill himself, that too much rode his shoulders.

Please, please don't take this away from me. I know what I have to do. I've known since third year. This—this is just a place in my mind where I like to vanish sometimes. Let me have it.

Hawthorn woke late, with thoughts and memories scrambled and drifting in her mind. She lay staring at the ceiling for a long moment, trying to decide why her dream mattered so much to her when such bad news had come from the Ministry yesterday. Surely she ought to live in the world that the news defined, not the one that her thoughts did.

And then the full force of her dream returned.

Hawthorn literally jumped out of bed, then nearly went sprawling as a sheet caught her foot. She kicked it off, limped into her potions lab, and went towards notes she'd made months ago, blowing the dust off them. She hadn't worked in the potions lab since she returned, and the Aurors hadn't had a chance to damage it, so she had done only the most basic cleaning spells in here.

The dreams weren't entirely dreams, of course. Voldemort's mind had woven through hers. She had lost most of the memories that might be useful—where the burrow was, for example—but others, odd bits of information that she picked up in conversation and eavesdropping, still remained to her. Some of them concerned the potions Adalrico had brewed and improved for Voldemort.

And combined with the knowledge she'd had in the months before her enslavement—

Combined with the visionary force of the dream that had struck her—

One piece of that puzzle might help her to figure out this one.

Hawthorn flung her pyjama sleeve over one arm and bent to begin writing. She *had* to write now, or she feared the dream would

vanish.

Indigena had recovered only slowly from the Stone's winter. Most of the flowers in her body still wanted to sleep. Cold spoke of hard times for them, months when the roots survived but the bright petals had to fold, or wither and blow away. It was only with the greatest difficulty that Indigena kept her eyes open as she stood attendance on her Lord.

The atmosphere in the burrow didn't help, either.

Voldemort's magic brewed like a potion, sang and hissed like a serpent forced into hibernation early, slid around her like the edge of a vine she didn't control. Indigena sat with her head bowed and resting on her knees, her arms looped around them, her breathing slow and steady. Meanwhile, the enormous might darkened the sky and made the walls of the burrow tremble at odd moments, as if they would fall in on her.

This was the true reason a wizard should not have so much magic, Indigena believed. Not that there was a problem with it inherently, or that anyone was incapable of maintaining his morality in the face of such power, but because of the discomfort it caused for other wizards and witches to be around that person.

Sylvan and Oaken showed less discomfort, but then, they were out of the burrow most of the time, capturing more Muggleborn children and bringing them back for Voldemort to drain. The soul-pattern in the largest room grew bigger and bigger. The basilisks stirred in their eggs under the warm sand. The Dark Lord brooded.

As soon as the warmth increased to the point where her flowers could open, Indigena promised herself, she would step outside. She could not bear to be in here much longer.

Besides, if she understood the bargain Voldemort had struck with the wild Dark correctly, he couldn't make another attack until Midwinter, still a month away. The thought of enduring this poison for thirty days made Indigena's skin crawl, and brought to her delicious, wistful thoughts of the gardens and greenhouses in Thornhall, so far away.

Hawthorn swallowed. The potion required a swan feather, and she didn't think she had one. But she could, of course, track down and trap a swan. She knew where they swam.

She just wondered if it was worth pursuing, if this entire potion was worth brewing. Did she stand on the brink of a great discovery, or of death, because of a fever dream she didn't want to take the time to investigate properly?

Then she pushed the thought away. She *knew* the dream was real. The sheer force of it had settled on her mind like a lead weight, and she'd worked like a madwoman since dawn, brewing and mixing and writing notes and casting spells into the potion at the perfect moment. She knew the limitations of the recipe, but she also believed she might have found a way around them. No, she *knew* she'd found a way around them. So she could not stop this.

Even if it kills you?

Hawthorn shrugged, and stood, reaching for her cloak. She would find a pond or a river where a swan swam, and get the feather.

In the back of her head was the thought that her life was worth little anyway, if she could not manage to make up in some way for the harm she had done in Voldemort's service—and the reason she had done that harm.

Harry stood patiently on the Northumbrian beach that had seen several of the important things that happened in his life—sailing ships at Midsummer with James, fighting Voldemort on the day he tried to command the sirens to capture Muggles, riding with the unicorns. It was a relatively deserted place, with the natural magic keeping Muggles from noticing that it was uninhabited or venturing there in large numbers. The presence of northern goblins nearby, and the wards at Lux Aeterna, Harry thought, might have something to do with that, too.

It was here that the people of the first wizarding village to be evacuated, tiny Torpenhow, had come to meet the French ships.

Harry had been surprised at first to learn that they would leave by ship instead of Apparating, but then he'd realized that most of

the residents of Torpenhow were weaker wizards and witches unsure of their ability to Apparate between countries, and children. It was simply easier and quieter for them to be taken across the Channel in French ships, especially since not many magical creatures had elected to flee Britain.

The ships themselves, constructed by the Veela Council, looked like nothing human. Harry eyed the one that stood off the beach with some wonder. It had flaring wings, and a prow that blended directly into the figurehead, a seagull's fierce projecting beak and glaring eyes. The whole of it was white, and shimmered with a silver tinge, rather like Veela hair. The sails belled and danced to a wind that Harry did not think was natural.

The boats rowing in from the ship looked more ordinary, with Veela or part-Veela in each one. As they ground up on the gray sand, people leaped out to help the villagers inside. Harry raised his magic and looked around alertly. He was there mostly to make sure Voldemort did not attack in the middle of the transfer, when most people would be helpless to do more than cower or seek to protect the children and belongings that had come with them.

Only his own dread darkened the horizon, though, and most of the villagers, solemn and silent and white-faced in the middle of abandoning their home, entered the boats without a hitch. The Veela helped them in, singing under their breaths sometimes, a tune that had the sound of a dirge. Harry could see why. Veela were, supposedly, terribly attached to a home once they had chosen it, and at once honored the strength of those who could leave their own homes and mourned the necessity of it.

“Harry?”

He turned, to see Adrienne Delacour, Fleur's and Pierre's cousin, striding towards him. Behind her came Roxane, the official representative of the Veela Council. Roxane's face was tight. Harry tensed, wondering if something had happened.

Roxane spoke to him first, and without a shred of courtesy. But then, Harry had thought she was a woman like that since their first meeting. “It is true that the British government is fallen, and you have no Minister?”

“We have Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper,” said Harry, wondering how they could have known one piece of news but not the other. “He escaped the ruin of the Ministry. If your Minister would like to be in contact with him—“

“It is not that.” Roxane shook her head hard enough that some of her own hair hit her in the face. “But we do not trust him. It is a bad time for Britain to have no leader. Therefore, you are the leader, yes? France will deal with you as such. The Veela Council will deal with you as such.”

Harry shifted his shoulders back and forth while he thought about that. Then he shrugged. He doubted he could keep people in France from thinking of him as Britain's leader if they really wanted to do so. What he *could* prevent was people coming to him for information that he couldn't provide, or decisions he couldn't make.

“My words won't have the force of law,” he pointed out. “I couldn't make treaties, or allocate funds, or give France promises that would hold after the war.”

“If we choose to take it as the force of law, it will,” said Roxane. “The money, no, but I have heard of the goblins and how they respect the *vates*. They may give you money if you ask for it. We need someone who can *speak* for Britain, whose voice we can trust, and whom we can negotiate with as the seasons and the situation change.”

Harry frowned. “Why? If you don't mind my asking, what is wrong with the arrangements that the French Minister and the Veela Council have created for me so far?”

“Voldemort is coming.” If Roxane feared the Dark Lord, she didn't show it, but then, she seemed more interested in practicalities than in fear. “That will require a closer alliance between us. France will send more Aurors. They will send food, if needed. Money, if needed.”

Harry stared at her. After the decision by the International Confederation of Warlocks that he had to stop violating the Statute of Secrecy, he had been sure he wouldn't receive any more help from abroad. It was one thing for France to help him on the sly, another for them to openly defy the governing body of wizards—especially when the Acting British Minister was still alive.

“Why?” he asked.

“Voldemort will invade our shores,” said Roxane, “if he defeats you. He will come for us first, since we are closest to him. And while the others might not worry about that, they will not come to help us, either, if they do not come to help you. We are making sure that your victory takes place on the soil of your land, not on the soil of ours.”

Harry licked his lips. He supposed he had taken up a large share of the responsibility already.

But they had counted on using Juniper as a figurehead. That wouldn't be possible if he heard about Harry accepting part of the power that should rightfully be his. He might not start a civil war, but he wouldn't eat the reassuring lies that people like Cupressus wanted to feed him.

"I regret to say that I can't give you an answer right now," he said quietly. "I will stand security for any promises I make, but as of the moment I am making them for myself and the Alliance of Sun and Shadows, not for my country as a whole. There are wizards even now who prefer not to be allied with me, you know, or to come under my protection. They believe it would cost them too much."

"Then they are fools," said Roxane. "Know that the French government does not intend to accept your Acting Minister. Power and practicality are harder masters than political delicacy. We will work with none other than the *vates*." And she turned back to the ships as if a discussion had concluded.

Harry shook his head. He would have to seek Cupressus's and Miriam Smith's advice. He had not the slightest idea how he could take the leadership but convince Juniper that he was still in charge. The Minister was stupid, but he knew how to read the newspapers, and he saw treason in every shadow.

Hawthorn grabbed the Stupefied swan as it drifted towards shore and spread one wing wide, plucking the feather from it. Originally, she'd intended to kill the bird, but she felt compelled not to now. Let it live. It hadn't done her any harm, and sometimes a slight aura of power, almost like a willing sacrifice, could be added to potions ingredients harvested from a living animal. The collector could have killed it, but had chosen not to, and the magic would know and remember that.

And it would be appropriate, given what the purpose of the potion she was brewing was.

For a moment, Hawthorn lost herself in hope, standing there with the feather in one hand and the swan's wing in the other, and she still stood like that when her Stunner wore off. Then she had to duck to avoid a blow from the swan that could have broken either her neck or her arm.

The swan hissed at her as it swam back into the middle of the river, shaking its tail and settling several ruffled feathers.

Hawthorn sniffed as she Apparated again. She was allowed to think they were evil birds. There was no rule against that.

Owen paced along the walls, carefully enchanting them. When wards were up around the doors, the windows, and the broken pieces of furniture in the middle of the room, his twin finally rolled his eyes and broke the silence.

"And what do you think you're doing?" he demanded, folding his arms.

"Blocking the way out." Owen turned around, bouncing his wand lightly in his hand, and looked Michael straight in the eye. "You won't get away from me this time. You're run every time I tried to corner you and talk to you in the last few days, but not now."

Michael rolled his eyes again. "It could just be that I have nothing to talk with you about, Owen. How hard is that to comprehend?"

"I know that you have something to say on the subject of Harry," Owen replied. "The way that you stare at him conveys *that*. He hasn't noticed, thank Merlin, what with everything else that he has to do, but he may emerge from his haze and notice fairly soon. Have you thought—"

"What is it with you and your sympathy for him?" Michael gave his hair a shake that would have done credit to a wild pony. "Has it occurred to you, Owen, that I've suffered too? What about the people who lost family and friends in the Ministry? *They're* the victims, here. They're the ones you should be worried about, if you want to be worried about someone. Not Harry. He survives disaster after disaster, and still everyone loves him." Owen knew he hadn't imagined the undertone of resentment in Michael's voice. "He has all the sympathy he can handle. Everyone loves him, everyone admires him. Why don't you spend some sympathy on me, and our dead mother and sister?" Michael took a step forward. "Sometimes, I think you forget that we're brothers, forget

your obligation to the family.”

Owen sighed. He should have insisted that his father give Michael an education more similar to the one he'd received after all. Charles hadn't thought his second son needed it; he would have a different life. But now he was Owen's heir, and not even the wound of Medusa and Eos's loss, which should have been shared between them, had made them bleed the same blood. Michael was too much a child. He didn't understand that while he spoke what might have been the truth for *him*, Owen's oath to Harry meant Harry would have to come first in his life.

“I forget nothing,” he said quietly. “But I'm both family head and sworn companion right now. And while there aren't any Rosier-Henlin relatives to protect since they all fled, and it would be madness to defend our lands, I'm spending my energy on protecting Harry.” He pushed towards his main reason for the meeting. “Actually, Michael, I wanted to ask if you would take my place as head of the Rosier-Henlin family. That would both relieve me of an obligation and make sure that someone who does care and does have the time is taking care of Rosier-Henlin interests.” *And it would give you something else to think about than Draco and Harry*, he thought, though he didn't say that aloud.

And it would be the perfect situation for Michael to learn about adult responsibilities, too, since there virtually were none at the moment. He could study the dances he'd need to know, the rituals, and what it would mean when the war ended and he did have people to protect and meetings to attend as a head of the family. Owen wanted a long period between the first time his brother cracked a book and the first time he tried to put what he'd learned into practice.

Michael folded his arms and looked away.

Owen blinked. Twice. “You're going to say no, aren't you?” he demanded.

“Of course.” Michael looked faintly bored when he turned back. “I have ambitions that don't involve our family, Owen. You know that.”

“I thought it was the one thing you did still care about. With the way that you talked about our mother and sister—“

“You thought wrong. Who I am isn't defined by my blood. It doesn't begin and end with my last name.” Michael's face was firmly closed, and stubbornly set.

“Then what do you want?” Owen feared that answer.

“Just a little sympathy.” Michael's eyes glittered. “Just a little consideration. Just a little *remembrance* that I won't do what everyone else wants me to do, when they want me to do it. I'm not a toy.” He lifted his wand. “Now, take these spells off the room, or I'll blast them down.”

Owen stood gazing at his twin for a moment longer. It seemed so long since they'd shared a single brain. Not since Michael had become infatuated with Draco, at least, and that had happened soon after the Midsummer battle.

In the end, he had to shake his head and let Michael out. As he watched him go down the hall, he wondered if Michael himself knew what he wanted.

Hawthorn gazed and gazed at the potion on her desk, which sparkled a smooth, liquid silver, and didn't vanish when she turned her back, though she half-expected it to.

If she had done it correctly, she had bypassed the potion's limitations. She had cast part of her magic into the potion, but she'd used a shortcut that Adalrico had used on some potions where he didn't have Snape's native brewing skill. He'd chosen an enchanted artifact and dissolved the artifact slowly in a blend of acids. There was a flickering moment between the dissolving and the moment when the artifact ceased to exist at all when a spell would capture the magic and make it behave like the wizard's or witch's own power.

Adalrico had used that to compensate for his lack of reflexes and innate genius with potions. Under the magic of the artifact, volatile ingredients would sit together quietly. Hawthorn had used that captured magic to infect the potion, and make it think that she was sacrificing a great portion of her own strength.

And so, if she were right, if she could trust the force of the dream that had come to her, she would have her long desire in her hands.

Of course, there was also the fact that it might kill her, given that a large part of its ingredients consisted of pure silver from Sickles she'd melted.

After a moment, she picked up the vial. Her hand trembled.

"I don't see any way that we can keep Juniper from newspapers," Harry said through the fireplace. Cupressus's plan to keep the Acting Minister as isolated as possible, telling him it was for his own safety, and only bring him out when the occasion demanded, was a good one, but Harry was not sure how practical it would be to use from day to day. "Nor from asserting his own idiocy if someone shouts out a question to him while he's making his speeches."

"I can control what newspapers he receives," said Cupressus calmly. "So far, he has made no attempt to leave the house. He believes me when I tell him of his countless lurking enemies."

"And when he *does* want to leave?" Harry asked.

Cupressus shook his head. "His home was laid waste. I believe that the Yaxley twins went there looking for him. And given how stupid Erasmus is, that was actually a good tactic. For now, he believes me when I tell him there is no safer place for him than with the leader of the British part of the Light alliance, and a fellow member of the Order of the Firebird."

Harry, a bit appeased, returned to one of his original concerns. "And when the *Daily Prophet* reports on the Minister of France deciding to treat me as the leader of Britain? He'll read *that*, of course."

"You underestimate the wards on my home." Cupressus smiled a bit. "I am an old hand at politics, Mr.—Black, and in my day, there were people who would pay to know what my letters said when they left the house. I have wards that change the words on every piece of paper to make them say what I wish them to say. The *Prophet* articles will become harmless long before Erasmus sees them."

It was the best compromise they could find, Harry thought. And he certainly didn't want to refuse the French Minister's aid for the sake of one man's comfort, as compared to all the people who could use the food and the funds that the French might be able to send them.

"Accept the position, Black."

Surprised, Harry looked up with a blink. Cupressus had actually leaned towards him, as if about to extend a hand through the green flames, and his face had lost the smile. His eyes glinted, though, the hard look of a predatory bird riding a windstorm.

"It will benefit all of us," Cupressus went on. "At the moment, we need to look more like a unified group than a coalition to keep our people from panicking, even if we know the truth behind the scenes. One wizard whom the international community speaks with, whom the Light and Dark families follow, and whom Voldemort fears is a good thing. It will make us seem as if we know what we are doing, more than anything else. And that, in turn, will tame the reports that filter out, both at home and abroad."

Harry let out a breath. "It's still precarious. Juniper could find out at any time, and cause havoc."

"Risky, but worth the risk." Cupressus's eyes glinted again. "And if it comes to that, I would rather silence Erasmus than lose you and the command of the war."

Harry decided not to ask what "silence" meant. He really didn't want to know. Besides, he didn't think that Cupressus's ethics would let him murder the Acting Minister.

Probably.

"Very well," he said, and then stepped away from the flames and shut the Floo connection down with a nod to Cupressus. Despite the man's wise words, there were only so many things that newspaper articles and calm announcements could do. Britain was still reeling under a psychological wound, the loss of their people and their government only slowly sinking home.

It would need something greater than calm words to heal that wound.

It began as fire.

Her bones were iron, melting in a forge. Her blood had become silver, and it scored and scalded her skin, which itself was not much less painful than burning water. Her mind melted and slipped, and she saw life as a pit of brilliant white light into which she fell. She tumbled down, and she knew she was screaming, but she could not hear anything beyond the intense blaze. It was as if sight had taken the place of sound, and crowded out her other senses—except for touch, of course, and the nerves that carried the pain signals.

It turned to water.

She drowned under crushing pressure, the ocean descending on her head, making her ears ring, bursting her eardrums with the weight. She welcomed the return of sound, but her scream was still a rusty noise somewhere in the distance. She struggled madly and felt the struggles become fainter and fainter, yielding to reality.

It hurt more than any transformation. That was part of the point, of course, and the reason why the potion stood such a high chance of killing her. The human body, strengthened by the curse, could become a werewolf at the full of the moon and change back again—with a great deal of pain, naturally, but non-fatally, most of the time. This time, Hawthorn had nothing but her own will to stand against the pain.

And she could not lose consciousness. She had to guide the potion, tied to the portion of her sacrificed magic that remained inside the liquid. Lose her concentration, and it would not know what it was supposed to do. The molten silver would run rampant, react badly against the werewolf curse in her blood—well, worse than it was already reacting—and slay her.

She remained awake, from moment to moment, existing in a world of pain, and of utmost dedication.

Harry sang from the top of the Astronomy Tower, his head tilted back and the phoenix song flowing from his throat.

The last time he had done this, he had done it to remind people of his rebellion and the magical creatures waiting for wizards to acknowledge them. This time, the purpose was both simpler and broader: to remind people of the existence of hope. To give them a moment free of grief, if he could. To tell them that Light still existed in the world.

This time, he rose with the song, hanging at a point in the air high above Hogwarts before his consciousness fragmented and raced away with different sparks of light speeding in different directions, rather like falling stars.

He danced out across the Forbidden Forest, and the centaurs looked up as he passed overhead and stamped their hooves in time. Other voices joined theirs, curling around the trees of the Forest, singing a song that Harry had not heard for years. The first time he had gone running through the Forest, accompanying Remus and Sirius as they took Connor for a run, the creatures had sensed the presence of the *vates* and responded. This time, their voices were more solemn, reflecting both the triumphs and the losses in the years since, including the loss of the phoenix who had flown with him then, but still they resounded.

He flew to Ireland, and raced into the middle of a meeting of Light wizards discussing if they should listen to Cupressus and ally with Harry. They went still as they heard. One or two shook their heads, evidently trying to dismiss it as a persuasive tactic, but the rest of them had softened faces, and one woman put her head down on the table and wept.

There was water beneath the phoenix song, and another ship coming from France heard. Harry saw heads tilt back as if the Veela could pinpoint the exact source of the song, the single trailing point of light that soared over them and on towards the east, across Europe, where Harry soon gave up trying to follow it; the number of people and places that appeared was dizzying.

The refugees still in the safehouse at Copley-by-the-Sea came to the windows and looked out. One small girl asked her mother if the sunset was singing.

Molly Weasley stood still, and closed her eyes, and put down the towel with which she'd dried dishes. Her husband, absent from the Ministry two days before by the merest of chances, came up behind her and put his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder.

Kanerva laughed and danced in the winds high above Britain. The song mattered to her, but more important was the sheer fascination that lingered in the dark beyond the stars. The wild Dark heard, and wanted the voice. It amused Kanerva because she knew them both, audience and singer, so well, and she laughed to show that she did, if anyone else knew her private language.

Jing-Xi arrived again in the room at Hogwarts that she had nearly made her own. She paused. The mantle behind her turned to jade.

Laura Gloryflower wheeled on a winged silver horse high above the ground, patrolling a wizarding village that would have to await its turn to evacuate until more safehouses in France could be opened up. She bowed her head, clenched her hand into a fist, and held the fist to her heart. This was the voice, the essence, of the Light that she had sworn to serve.

A scrap of awareness, caught and drifting on the wind, turned in the direction of the phoenix song. It reminded the ghost who had been Aurora Whitestag of—well, of something she had forgotten. After a moment, she shook her head and moved on. She had only one purpose, and she could not forsake the premise of her existence.

Michael Rosier-Henlin turned his head away, and closed the shutters of the window through which he'd heard the song.

Draco lifted his head and soaked it in. He would have grabbed anyone else standing next to him, paralyzed with wonder, and bragged that he was dating the man who sang like that, but they all knew already, and in any case he was close to being paralyzed with wonder himself.

Regulus stopped sorting through artifacts in Silver-Mirror and sat back for a time, his eyes blankly and contentedly staring into the fire.

Connor closed his eyes and held Parvati.

From person to person, from magical creature to wizard, from ocean to land, Harry strung the song, and tried his best to make a point of hope glow in the sky next to every star.

Hawthorn opened her eyes slowly. The first thing she noticed was that she hurt more than she had when Lucius bound her in silver shackles, or used the *Argenteus* curse on her.

The second thing she noticed was the stillness in her own mind.

She sat up, frowning. What had changed? The empty potions vial beside her reminded her of what she had *meant* to do, but she could not tell if it had worked. She reached up and felt her temple, shaking her head. The faith that had carried her into the experiment seemed mad now. How could she have risked her life over a dream?

And then she knew what was different.

Her mind was still. The muttering, savage voice of her wolf, that spoke constantly of blood and darkness and the need to kill, was gone.

She had succeeded in curing herself of lycanthropy.

Her head found her folded arms, and she wept.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Nine: Delegation, Darkness, and Draco

Erasmus knew they thought him stupid, but in reality, he was more intelligent than all of them. He looked into the shadows, and knew them for the distractions they were.

Cupressus and the rest might think they could make some sort of compromise with the Dark. Let Dark wizards soothe them with sweet words, talk to them about politics that combined the two allegiances, and offer them help against Voldemort, and they would nod and give in. They couldn't deal with the destruction of the Ministry. It was a cancer in their minds, and in an effort to ignore the cancer, they gave in to the power that had destroyed it.

One couldn't trust Dark wizards. Erasmus had known that. He'd tried to tell the others that. And now they said that it was just *one* kind of Dark wizard, Voldemort's kind, that couldn't be trusted, while the others had a more benevolent influence.

As if there were different breeds of them. As if the malignant malevolence of one “breed” could be overridden by the work of another who would have done the same thing to the Ministry that Voldemort did, if he only had the gift and the power and the same twisted ambitions.

No, what was needed was a renaissance of the Light. Instead of allying with Dark wizards and saying it was the best they could do, they should show forth the power of the sun. That was the true hope that would make other people follow them, and admit that they’d been wrong in thinking the struggle against Voldemort hopeless, or worthy of moral corruption.

But Erasmus was realistic. If they’d ignored his word enough to talk to Dark wizards in the first place, he couldn’t make a speech or remind them of the existence of the Order of the Firebird and expect that to turn them back to him.

He would have to do something else. Use a tool that the Light had used, but also secure a great part of the Light’s power.

He knew how to do that. There were Aurors who had escaped the Ministry’s destruction, working in the field. Some of them had more closely agreed with him than others; that was the kind of person Erasmus had settled in the properties seized from Dark wizards. And some of them had artifacts, or could fashion artifacts, that would aid them in proclaiming the Light.

He made a firecall, on the sly. He could not prove it, but he was almost sure that none of his letters were leaving Cupressus’s house in their original form. Even the Floo was risky; he might be intercepted, and Cupressus could still control what happened to him as long as he was in his home.

But he was not intercepted. He spoke to an Auror, Duckworth, who understood, and who would come for him as soon as possible. He would bring what was needed with him, too, and then Erasmus had only a few more easy steps to take to insure that his vision became a reality.

Things were moving.

“But why isn’t he moving?”

“I don’t know.” Harry kept his voice patient as steel. He didn’t have the time to give in and crumple under pressure, and this would be an especially bad time, when he was trying to reassure a representative from Hogsmeade. Hogsmeade was the largest single wizarding population around now, at least if one didn’t count Diagon Alley, and they’d already been attacked once. Though some brave souls had gone back to their houses, Harry couldn’t blame them for being afraid, or their representative, Candida Coltsfoot, for wanting definite answers as to why Voldemort hadn’t attacked them yet.

He couldn’t blame her, he told himself again and again. That would have to provide a sufficient guard against strangling her.

“You must know.” Candida leaned forward confidingly. She was in her late thirties, Harry thought, or her early forties. Her hair was already streaked with white. He couldn’t tell if that came from magic, or a natural coloration—sometimes the intensely inbred pureblood families looked like that—or stress. Her eyes were too big for the space over her nose, wide and staring, blue clouded with bloodshot. “I’ve heard that you’re—connected to him.” Her eyes flickered to the scar on his forehead. “You can use that to find out, can’t you, why he’s not attacking? When he’ll attack again?”

Harry held himself still. He couldn’t be sure that someone had really found out about his and Voldemort’s connection; it could be a rumor, or a lucky guess, or some magical theorist’s insistence on symmetry. “I can’t venture into a pit as black as Voldemort’s mind, madam,” he said. That would have to satisfy her.

It didn’t, of course. Candida’s face darkened again. “You can’t possibly want people to die, Mr. Black.”

“Of course not,” said Harry, trying to get over the strangeness of being addressed by his new last name.

“Of course not,” Candida repeated, nodding. “No matter what people say about you, I know that you’re different from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” She leaned forward again. “And that means that you *have* to locate the time and date of the next attack. How else can you save lives?”

Harry smiled sadly. Perhaps a dose of truth would content her. It would do something to satisfy the guilt that had dissolved a corner of his mind again. “Even if I’d known about the attack on the Ministry, madam, I don’t think I could have saved everyone. Voldemort would have probably managed to drain people and cause some damage. And when I did arrive, when I did know, it was too late. He was simply too powerful. He still has most of that magic. If he commences an attack on Hogsmeade, I’ll know,

and I'll be sure to stop him as soon as I know. But, at the moment, we simply don't have a spy among his ranks, or any way to *guess* what's coming next before Midwinter, when we know he plans an attack. He's not that predictable."

"You must know," said Candida. She seemed rather hung up on that.

Harry heard the door open behind him, and knew from the sound of the footfalls that Draco had entered. He frowned slightly, but only in his mind. He knew Draco wouldn't have interrupted his meeting with Hogsmeade's representative unless something was badly wrong.

"I can't predict it," he said simply. "We can draw up maps and likely strategies, but Voldemort is insane. We can warn people and evacuate them, but inevitably someone might live in a wizarding village we miss out on warning in time, or might decide to stay and then get attacked. Our warning system of Aurors and trained defenders is very good, but it can't be perfect."

"It's your responsibility to protect us." Candida's face had turned red by now.

Harry could hear a growl from Draco. He winced. Draco was always in a worse mood when he was made to wait.

"I'm sorry, madam," he said. "I'll give you the reassurance, the protection, the leadership, I can, but I can't guarantee that no one will be hurt."

"Or that twelve hundred people won't die either, is that right?" Candida demanded. Twelve hundred people was the *Daily Prophet's* estimate for how many wizards had been in the Ministry when it collapsed. "I don't understand. How can you claim to be doing *any* good when your best guesses are this weak and unrealistic?"

"We'll still try—"

"That's not good enough." Candida closed her eyes and turned away from him, shaking her head as if someone had tried to put a bridle on her. "We *have* to have more than that. Sing all you want, Black, but in the end, what we want is safety, and hope, and we can't have that when you suffer disasters like this and permit disasters like them to happen."

Harry opened his mouth, and then closed it, swallowing. What good would yelling at her do? It might ease his anger for a moment, but it would make him guilty later. Besides, it would drive her further into her shell and convince her she was right, and he needed the people of Hogsmeade to at least listen to him, as he needed the people of every wizarding village to listen if he was going to protect him. Perhaps he should let Cupressus speak to her. He might be able to point the contradiction in her logic—she wanted protection from disasters like the one at the Ministry, but she was also convinced that Harry was the reason the disaster had happened—better than Harry could.

"If you believe that, madam, we have nothing more to say to each other for right now," he murmured. "I'll have Cupressus Apollonis speak to you."

"Who's he?" Candida cocked her head to the side. "I don't recognize his name from the *Prophet*."

There were only four articles about him, Harry thought sarcastically. Perhaps there should have been five?

But then he subdued that impulse, too. He knew Candida had lost a sister in the Ministry's collapse. Under the circumstances, it was understandable that she would pay attention to the news of that first and other things later, if at all.

"He's the leader of the Irish part of the Light alliance, madam," he said. "He escaped the collapse of the Ministry, and rescued Minister Juniper." Around Candida, it didn't seem wise to call Juniper the Acting Minister. "He has a very clear view of these things."

Candida looked pleased. "I would rather speak with him, then." She gave a decisive nod, and Harry heard Draco growl again. He winced a second time.

"I'll contact him and let him know, madam."

Candida swept grandly out of the room, pausing to eyeball Draco, as if she didn't know what *he* was doing here. Harry waited until she was gone, because he didn't know if he could have controlled his face, looking at her, and then turned around and faced Draco with a small nod.

"What collapsed, broke, or burned?" he asked.

"I actually had good news." Draco moved forward and wrapped his arms around Harry. Harry stroked his back. "I've made contact with some of the Aurors who were out of the Ministry and working when it fell. There are a few who saw no choice but to serve Juniper if they didn't want to be sacked, but now that he's not in power, they'd rather join your side."

"That is wonderful, Draco," said Harry, and let most of his bad mood drain away. "How many want to come to us?"

"Ten right now," said Draco. "Leave it alone for a few days, and that might become fifteen or twenty. Yes, it's not very many people, but their symbolic impact is more important than their numbers." He stood still a few moments more, while Harry continued to stroke his spine. He was trembling with indignation over something else, but Harry didn't know what it was.

Then he burst out, "How can you let them *treat* you like that, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't *like* it," he said wryly. "But it's a choice between keeping channels of communication open and losing people to my own pride, Draco. Given that kind of decision, I know where I stand."

"But you don't have to," Draco muttered rebelliously into his shoulder. "No one should have to accept whatever someone else tells him, without protest or complaint, just because he's a leader."

"I have greater power," said Harry. "With that might come giving up a few ordinary things that ordinary people get to do, like protesting unfair treatment." He shifted from side to side, restlessly. This discussion was making him dwell on the conversation with Candida, which he didn't want to do. He wanted to sit in a corner for a few minutes and think of darkness and ending. It was healthier than filling his mind with continued poison.

"And it makes them lose respect for you," Draco pointed out, quick as a striking serpent. "That won't win them to your side either, Harry, if you're so weak that they think they can say whatever they like to you."

Harry hissed between his teeth, unhappy. He wanted to change into a lynx and run through the Forbidden Forest. He wanted to bury himself in thoughts of suicide and hoped they cooled the fire building behind his forehead. Most of all, he wanted to shout at Draco, and he didn't *want* to want that.

"I don't see that there's much I can do," he said casually. "Yes, yelling at them might prompt respect, but it might just as easily make them not listen to me, and I need them to listen—"

"Why?" Draco threw up his hands, then lowered them and glared at him. "If someone comes making unreasonable demands of you, like Coltsfoot does, you can ignore them. You don't need to waste your time listening to them and coddling them, not when actually reasonable people exist and want to talk to you."

"She represents people who are innocent even if she isn't," Harry snapped, showing a bit of the fire in the cracks between the stones. He watched the shutters on the classroom windows bang in the wake of his magic, and took a deep breath, which hissed out again. "Cut her off, and I'm cutting off access, and warnings, and protection, to them."

"Just tell her that you want a new representative, then," said Draco, unflinching as steel. "Tell her you won't talk with her anymore, but the people of Hogsmeade are more than welcome to send a new representative who doesn't want the impossible."

"Would that work?" Harry asked. He assumed the people Candida spoke for had chosen her for a reason.

"It's as likely to as anything else, isn't it?" Draco took another step closer to him. "You're worrying yourself apart doing things like this, Harry. Either demand a replacement for the people like Coltsfoot, or delegate the task of dealing with people like her to others." His teeth gleamed when he smiled. "Me, for example."

"They'd demand—"

"You've let them get away with too much. Yes, they might demand, but that doesn't mean you have to give in." Draco leaned forward and scanned his face closely, as if he were seeing every drop of Harry's weariness and were determined to drink them down and away. "At least try the experiment. I hate to see your strength spent on worrisome little things like this. We don't want you so tired from slapping at mosquitoes that you can't face the dragon."

Harry closed his eyes. That was a fact, wasn't it? He wanted to make plans for Midwinter, but he had no time when his life was filled with half a hundred daily crises that must be dealt with *now*. And until this moment, there had seemed no solution, because people like Candida insisted on speaking with Harry directly.

Time, perhaps, to see how well they actually deal with people like Draco. Midwinter is worse. If I have to prioritize, then I have to do what I can to make sure I come out of that alive.

“All right,” he said, opening his eyes. “You’re right, Draco. The next time Candida comes to Hogwarts, you can talk to her.”

“Of course I’m right.” Draco was giving him a smile that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a crocodile. “And thank you.”

Harry eyed him as he walked towards the door of the classroom. “Just don’t be too hard on her.”

“I’ll be gentle as a kitten,” said Draco, and his smile was even more vulpine, reminding Harry of the fact that his Animagus form was a fox. Harry shook his head and ducked into the hallway.

Perhaps he wouldn’t have to delegate, in a perfect world, but this wasn’t a perfect world, and his strength was being sapped. He had to do what he could to inspire hope in Britain, but endless hours of argument with petty village officials wasn’t the best way to do that.

At least, so he told himself, trying to attach Draco’s voice to his conscience.

Draco stretched as soon as Harry was out of sight, and let his smug smile burst forth. He was pleased with himself. He had wondered if he could convince Harry to delegate even by pointing out how useless Coltsfoot’s requests were, but it seemed Harry had finally reached his limit. That meant that Draco could speak to the Hogsmeade representative the next time she came to Hogwarts, and he had a few—choice—words for her.

His plan of contacting the Aurors had gone even better than he imagined. He had no proof that those Aurors whom he had slowly been working his way among, the ones who had seen him and Harry defeat Dumbledore, were still alive, but he’d taken a chance and set an owl to the property of a minor Dark family whose house he knew had been seized by the Ministry.

A reply had come at once. Draco still thought they were replying more to the promise of power inherent in Harry’s name than to him, but that hardly bothered him. He could work in Harry’s shadow and use his influence to orchestrate his own plans. Whatever worked.

The Auror who’d contacted him, Lightsborn, had warned Draco that the Acting Minister had spoken to them, too. Apparently he was concocting yet another plot against Harry, and at least a few of their fellows were going along with it.

Draco had pressed for more details, only to have Lightsborn admit she didn’t know them. She would pass them on as they manifested, though.

And, in the meantime, Draco got to have some fun from both ends of the spectrum, helping Harry both far away and here in Hogwarts.

He didn’t see how there could be anything wrong with that.

Harry leaned against the side of the Astronomy Tower and stared upwards.

Above him were stars, and now and then the swooping flight of a Gloryflower winged horse. They took turns patrolling the safehouses and patrolling Hogwarts, by Laura’s agreement with Harry. Harry hardly minded. If he was the target of a Midwinter attack, the battle would probably begin at the school, though Harry didn’t intend to let it end here. He would move Voldemort away as soon as he could, but that meant Laura and her followers could defend and shelter the students in the meantime.

He closed his eyes, for the moment, and dreamed.

Everything had ended, for him. The darkness had crept in around the corners of his mind and managed to flush most of the concerns of the daylight world away. He knew, somewhere, that other people still existed and still fought Voldemort, and he was grateful for their existence. But it wasn’t his struggle anymore.

Guilt had been put aside. Notions of atonement were put aside. Merlin, he could sleep. He had done all he could, and then died,

and that was the biggest offering he could make to the war.

Here there were no people clamoring for opinions they didn't like when Harry gave them, or unanswerable questions about whether he had done the right thing by the Ministry victims, Lucius, the Squibs' Association, Draco, Connor, Snape, Regulus, Medusa and Eos, his sworn companions. He wasn't anything more than a speck drifting in darkness. Sometimes he wasn't even that, but the times when Harry could achieve the complete oblivion he believed—he hoped—awaited him in death were rare.

He wanted it to end.

He let the feeling soak through him, enough to freeze and calm the anguish woken by Candida's accusations, and then stood and shook his head. Enough relaxation. He had to decide on a plan for the Midwinter attack.

He slipped quietly to the side of the Astronomy Tower and stood listening. No one was calling his name. Good. It seemed the truth he'd told everyone—that he wanted to be alone while he trained, that no one could be with him and survive such extremities of magic as he was going to practice—had held.

Harry stretched, then closed his eyes and tried to recall the sensation when he'd first fallen into his lynx form, months ago. Yes, it had taken the burst of his magic coming into full maturity to force him there then, but he had to be able to assume the form at will, or what good was it?

He strove for the imagination of four paws, fur settled on him like a jumper, a tail projecting from his spine. The sensation of lowness to the ground was, oddly, what he remembered best, even though he had been a fairly tall lynx.

The image appeared in his head, floating just out of reach. Harry gritted his teeth and forced himself towards it. He *was* a lynx, that was what he wanted to be at the moment, he could get there, he only had to walk a few more steps on the road separating him from the image and—

And he was there, opening his eyes and blinking to find that the night looked almost gray, and his nose was alive to so many intriguing and confusing smells that he doubted he could sort them out.

He leaped lightly down from the wall of the Astronomy Tower and padded through the school.

It was different, walking like this. He could smell despair and weariness and frustration and the occasional spot or two of happiness, though for the most part Hogwarts wallowed in a cloud of sadness and forced bravery. Nearly everyone had known someone at the Ministry. Nearly everyone was cut by that loss, affected by it. That it could have been worse was not a comfort. It could not have been *much* worse.

Harry walked softly, not only because of the pads on his paws but because of all that sadness. He traveled through the miasma to the entrance doors, cut small holes in the thick wards, and then patched them behind him. He picked up speed as he trotted across the edge of the grounds and towards the Forest.

With every movement, he became more used to running as a lynx, the moments when his belly fur almost brushed the ground, the silent enormous gifts of his paws, the whiskers that projected to either side of his face and twitched with a will of their own. The cold in the air made his blood rush faster and inspired a hunger in his belly that Harry knew could be quenched by meat. It wasn't creatures he was hunting tonight, though, but a suitable place.

He could feel the call of it almost as soon as he entered the Forest. He hesitated on a small rise, nose up, head cocked back to study the waning crescent of the moon, and then he turned and plunged towards it.

Brush crackled under him as Harry pressed forward, and then he was standing at the edge of the clearing into which he had once seen Nagini slither, dragging a helpless Connor behind her. It was the clearing where he and Connor had faced Voldemort at the end of first year, in Quirrell's body.

Harry spent a few moments pacing the edge, because this seemed as if it would be a place of power for Voldemort, not him. Then he caught an edge of a sweet odor on the air, and flicked his ears. Yes. That must be it. Connor's body had flared with white light when Quirrell had tried to touch him. Snape had always insisted that that showed the power of Harry's love for him, while Harry had preferred to believe, at first, that Connor had saved himself through his own purity.

Love it is.

Harry spent a few moments more sniffing the ground for the hint of any old traps that Voldemort might have left, then closed his

eyes and sat down, wrapping his tail around his paws. He could use magic in this form, as he knew from using it in his visions against Voldemort, and so he began to wrap his magic around him, weaving it into the bushes and trees around the edges of the clearing.

The trees were oaks, old and strong-rooted, but also mostly asleep now, as it was the beginning of winter. Harry tied the magic to their trunks instead of their branches, therefore, so that he wouldn't have to depend on a part of them that would be less awake than the rest. Shoving small balls of magic under roots and into bark and then running lines between them made for exacting, exhausting work, but Harry didn't intend to give up. The only possible way to combat Voldemort, who had considerably more magic than he did, was to prepare the ground carefully beforehand.

And the wild Dark?

Harry had to admit that he still didn't know how to handle the wild Dark. He could use the phoenix song to hold it fascinated for a short time, perhaps, but come Midwinter, the manticores had already told him that it intended to take his soul. No amount of enticing and teasing would hold it at bay then. It would come for him and rip his soul out of his body.

And, as he had made clear for himself from the beginning of his suicide-fantasies, to keep his mind from wandering too far, he couldn't die yet.

Harry's whiskers twitched, and his ears flattened, as he went on laying the nets around the edges of the clearing. He didn't know what to do about that. Voldemort he could lure, and the magic in the nets would provide distractions and momentary hindrances, which was the best that Harry could count on. Sting Voldemort in many small places all at once, as McGonagall had done when she changed his foot into a rat, and Harry would have a much better chance to use his own *absorbere* gift and drain the violently taken magic from him.

But the wild Dark had no such vulnerability, and it had shown no inclination to turn on Voldemort and rip his power away from him so far, which Harry wistfully imagined as the best thing that could occur.

He wove another net, and then another, and then paused as a white shape parted the bushes at the edge of the clearing and came towards him. He would have struck, but his nose had already identified the strong scents of horse and human sweat. It was a centaur—Moon, Harry saw as he came closer.

Moon slid to one knee in front of him. Harry had the time to reflect that they would make an odd sight for anyone happening along to see them, the white centaur bowing to a lynx.

"Hail, *vates*," Moon said solemnly. "We bring you news of Polaris's shining, and of the weight of your presence in the world."

Harry could have changed back to human, but he found he didn't want to. It was easier to keep spinning the nets of magic if he didn't have to expend energy in transformation, anyway. He cocked his head and ruffled his whiskers to show that he was listening.

"More webs are melting." Moon might have spoken that with exaltation in his voice, were he human, but Harry had long felt that centaurs didn't *do* exaltation. "Webs on magical creatures bred by Dark Lords and Ladies. The webs on magical serpents living in the deserts and jungles of Africa and South America. Webs on hippocampi, who have long been hidden from the sight of Muggles; they sport and play in the mid-oceans once more. Even those of our cousins who have found a home between the mighty trees and the sea speak of the redwoods stirring."

Harry hissed. That was all he needed to worry about, what havoc his mere presence in the world was causing.

Moon reached out a hand and touched his ears. It didn't feel like the kind of condescending gesture a human would make to a cat, Harry thought, but a gesture of comfort, solidity, reassurance between comrades. He slowed his lashing tail and waited for what Moon would say next.

"Polaris shines," the centaur told him. "The path of clarity is open, and we would be fools to ignore the message. For long centuries, it has been a guide for humanity, but also for the magical creatures; our ancestors followed it when they began their first migrations. The star speaks to you, *vates*, among all the others it addresses.

"It says this: though darkness is deep, one may pin his heart to a star and navigate by it. The truths of the world are still truths, whatever he endures. Thus the seasons come and go, and Polaris shines in the north, and magical creatures are freed from their undeserved webs at last." Moon slammed a hoof into the earth. "Do not forget what you are, *vates*, the larger path that waits for you as a burden and a gift."

And then he turned and charged into the darkness, again, which closed behind him like the swaying branches of trees. Harry gazed after him in wonder.

That's what I did forget when I was thinking only of the war and the cool, soothing darkness of death. That there are rewards, gifts, out there, too, that it isn't only about doing things and listening to complaints. Some people are grateful for what I've done, even if those people aren't human, and I can do more good that gives me pleasure as well as good that's solely for others.

Harry turned back to the nets of magic. Suddenly, his lack of a plan to deal with the wild Dark as yet seemed less like a failure and more like an opportunity to finish planning. He still had a few weeks to Midwinter.

I am the vates. I am not just a source of trouble and pain, even to myself, but a source of good things, too. I can remember that, just as I can remember to delegate. It does no one any good if I tip too far in the direction of guilt. Only Voldemort would truly want to see me fall that way.

“I have what you asked for, Minister.”

Duckworth's voice was guarded, thanks of course to the fact that they spoke through a hostile Floo, but Erasmus knew what he meant. He could feel his shoulders relaxing, and he nodded.

“So you've sent the message to Harry?”

“It was easy, Minister.” Duckworth shrugged a little. “His Malfoy lover contacted us. We did tell him that you'd like a meeting, and while he might be wary of that, what leader worth his salt could resist the opportunity to patch up old wounds? And that is what this shall be.”

Erasmus nodded. Let Cupressus listen all he liked, or Harry's Malfoy lover. They would hear only, and exactly, what Erasmus had given his loyal Aurors permission to say: that he wanted to meet with Harry and discuss their differences, and cement the alliance in the name of the Light. That there would be an additional presence at the meeting, one intended to secure Harry's strength for the Light, went unsaid. They would all think that Erasmus's request of Duckworth had only meant the message that had been passed along.

It might take a few days. Erasmus could wait. Let Harry just join him, and they would have enough power to sweep Voldemort away.

And to set other things right, too, things that should never have been allowed to happen.

Things like revealing the magical world to Muggles.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty: Helping Hands

Connor closed his eyes. If other people could achieve their Animagus forms in five months or less of training, he should be able to do it, too.

Well, it might have been slightly more than five months, for Draco. But it had been considerably more than five months for him.

He could see the boar that he would be clearly now, even the odd posture that it stood in: with one trotter picked up and curled near its chest, its whiskers bristling, its tusks extending to either side of its face. Peter had eased Connor past his dismay with the ugliness of the creature by pointing out how powerful it was. There was a reason that boars had killed so many heroes and hunters in the old legends. The sheer strength of their charges could carry them *up* a spear aimed at them and lead them to stab a man trying to kill them before the man could wrench back and free.

A length of space still separated him from the boar, though, and the length seemed unconquerable. He pushed and strained, and managed to get a few feet—or maybe inches—nearer, before Peter spoke softly to call him out of his Animagus trance and back into the real world.

“I don't understand,” Connor muttered, as he took a long sip of the glass of water Peter had waiting for him. “Harry did it without

even *trying* when his magic came to full maturity. Why is it taking me so long?" He knew he was probably whinging, but Peter was one of a very few people who wouldn't scold him for that. And, indeed, Peter just smiled and looked thoughtful in reply, instead of snapping.

"Your talents lie in other areas, Connor," he said. "After all, do you think Draco would have as easy a time with the Light spells that you can perform?"

"He's Declared Dark, though." Connor threw himself back on his favorite chair in Peter's office to sulk. It was soft behind him, the Cushioning Charm making the fabric even more deliciously comfortable to sit in. "He wouldn't want to perform Light spells even if he could do them."

"But even without his Declaration, he couldn't do them with the same level of power and accuracy that you can," said Peter calmly. "That's my point, Connor. Not everything depends on Declaration. There's the pressure of innate talent, as well. Most wizards think that they choose the Declaration they want to make of their own free will, but that's not always true. What spells they like to do and want to do and *can* do will prejudice them in a certain direction. Even the Grand Unified Theory makes that point." Peter picked up his own glass of water and used it, Connor thought, to conceal a smile. "Which rather dismayed some Light wizards and Dark wizards both, since they preferred to think that there was no way they would wind up on the opposite side, or that there was the chance their children would."

"Somehow Light spells feels like a minor talent next to Dark spells *and* an Animagus form," Connor said.

"You can also fly much better than he can," Peter pointed out. "And you're braver. No one else could have brought Harry back that night he flew off the Astronomy Tower but you."

"But Harry's good at flying, too," said Connor. "And Light magic. And the Animagus form." He stopped, shaking his head. "And—so many other things, really. I wish I had a talent that was just mine alone."

Peter set his glass of water aside and leaned forward. "Shall I tell you what I think, Connor? I can't promise that it's very comforting, but I think you might need to hear it."

Connor blinked and stared into Peter's eyes. They were earnest, and didn't waver. Connor felt a small gnawing hole open in the middle of his stomach. When Peter looked like that, he was about to become *serious*.

But it had to be done. He nodded determinedly. "Tell me."

"I think you were raised to believe you *must* be unique," Peter said softly. "If one other person in the world shared what you had, what you did, it diminished the value of what you had or did. But that's ridiculous, of course. Why should someone sharing it diminish it? Your father was a good Auror, but so were plenty of other people. And Lily believed in sacrifice, but so did other people."

"It was the Boy-Who-Lived belief, of course. That *was* unique, and I think they invested too much of you in it. The uniqueness came to be the compelling thing about that, the separation from other people, rather than the connections you could form with them. One other person like you couldn't be a friend, but had to be a rival, and that's why you resisted so strenuously any implication that you had anything in common with, say, a Slytherin."

Connor looked down and scowled at his hands. He didn't like to be told what he thought. Harry was right; it was very annoying.

"I got over that," he muttered. "I announced to everyone at the trial that Harry was the *real* Boy-Who-Lived, didn't I?"

"You did." Peter nodded. "And it was a very adult moment. And, I think, most of the time, you don't let this confusion overtake you. But you don't need to be unique to be special, Connor. A magical talent doesn't diminish just because one other person in the world can do what you did." He gave a small smile. "I think Harry would welcome other Parselmouths, if the person who shared the gift with him wasn't his mortal enemy."

Connor bit his lip and drummed his foot on the floor for a moment. Then he said, "And you don't think less of me, because I can't assume the Animagus form right now?"

Peter had him in a hug so fast that Connor never saw him move. He blinked and hugged him cautiously back. His parents had hugged him like that, of course, but since Connor had learned how much of his childhood had been a lie, it was impossible to look back on those memories with the same fondness as before.

“Of course not,” Peter whispered. “You’ve still managed to come much further than we did after two years of training. And yes, it’s true that we didn’t have a proper teacher, because we didn’t dare tell anyone what we were doing, but some of it was our own fault. I took much longer to accept that my form was a rat than you took to accept your form, for example. Never think that you’re doing poorly, compared to us.”

Connor felt a warm little glow. Harry himself might be more at home with Slytherins and consider Snape his father, but Connor still liked receiving words of praise from Gryffindors.

“Thanks,” he whispered, and then sat back, took another gulp from his glass of water, and straightened. “I’m ready to try again.”

“He should not go,” Snape pointed out. He knew his tone was logical, calm, full of maturity and poise. There was no reason for Regulus to look at him tolerantly, the way he would look at a child who insisted on staying up past his bedtime.

“And why not?” Regulus settled back against the chair in which he sat with a groan that was almost sinful. Snape controlled the impulse to frown at him. At least they weren’t in Hogwarts, where a student passing through the halls could have heard the sound, but in Silver-Mirror. That was still no reason for Regulus to be decadent. “The papers will pounce on him if he doesn’t. Skeeter can only do so much, you know. Already some of them are saying that Harry’s too overconfident of his own power, not to have visited the Acting Minister before this.” Regulus took another sip from the glass of wine he held and groaned again.

Snape averted his eyes, and frowned into the fire. “Draco thinks it a trap. So do I. There are Aurors in contact with Juniper as well as those in contact with Harry. It is highly likely that they’re planning something.”

“They always are.” Regulus’s voice was warm, lazy, breathy with wine. “Does it matter? Harry will go prepared, thanks to Draco’s warnings. If nothing happens, we can show Britain’s two leaders working together for the good of the country. If something does happen, it will be Juniper’s fault, and that will show that Harry was making a good faith effort while the old bastard wasn’t. It’s perfect. I trust you and Draco to keep him safe.” Regulus sipped. “And I’ll go as well, of course, should Harry want me along. In fact, it’s probably more proper that I do so, since Harry claimed my name.”

Snape turned away with a hiss. He could feel Regulus pausing, and setting the wineglass down, but he refused to look at him. Even when Regulus stood and walked over to stand beside his chair, Snape still refused to look up. And that was mature, too, considering that he knew he would fire a curse at Regulus if he *did* look up.

“Severus,” said Regulus, and he *would* have to use Snape’s first name, wouldn’t he? “Is this about jealousy over Harry’s last name? Please believe me when I say that I never encouraged him to choose Black as his last name over yours. I’m pleased that he chose it, of course, but I wouldn’t have wanted to cause you pain.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” said Snape. “Of course it is not. It is about Harry going into danger when he meets the Acting Minister.”

Regulus’s hand fell on his shoulder. Snape thought about shifting out from underneath it, but that would show a gesture that could be interpreted as one of discomfort. He did not wish to show that. He was not uncomfortable. His emotions were tucked in Occlumency pools. He had a place in Harry’s life, and he knew what it was. He was not jealous.

“A friendship with you would be much easier if you would *admit* what you felt and how you felt it, instead of making us guess,” Regulus muttered, and then he bent as if he were going to whisper into Snape’s ear, though no one else was there.

That kind of closeness, Snape could not tolerate, and he did move further back into the chair. “We should discuss what kind of guard Harry will have when he goes to meet Juniper,” he said stiffly. “For, be assured, he will need a guard.”

Regulus remained where he was for a long moment. Then he sighed and said, “If you want to be concerned about Harry, Severus, I can’t stop you. You’re his father.”

Snape felt a small stab of satisfaction. At least Regulus acknowledged that.

But why should he care about Regulus acknowledging it? The answer that made the most sense was his being jealous that Harry had chosen Black as a last name, and he was not jealous.

“I do wish,” Regulus went on, “that you trusted both me and Harry enough to know that we aren’t going to shut you out of his life. If you accepted that, you could do more things like brewing the poison that killed the rest of the Death Eaters, and fewer things like sulking and raging.”

Snape had to turn to face him then, because there was no choice. “I *do not* sulk.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow and regarded him.

“I do not,” said Snape sturdily. “I am occasionally—uncomfortable—with some choices Harry makes, some people he lets into his life, and especially the risks he takes. But his last name is not one of those things.”

“Do you know,” Regulus said, apparently talking to the wall, “I think that one should be as honest as possible in a war? Any day may be the last that you see someone else alive, at least for them to recognize you. And yet so many people lie and think they must keep up a cheerful front for the sake of others, when those people would prefer to see the truth, no matter how hurtful.”

“Regulus,” Snape hissed between his teeth, “shut up.”

“And then there are the ones who try to shut down conversations,” Regulus went on remorselessly. “Sometimes they forbid discussion of death and reality, as if that would somehow make them vanish. Or they insist that no truth that isn’t cheerful can be told, in the name of keeping up morale. Voldemort, of course, was notorious for insisting that his Death Eaters not tell him bad news, even when they had lost a battle badly, and punished those who did so.”

Snape stood and whipped towards the fireplace he’d used to Floo to Silver-Mirror. Regulus’s arms coming around his middle and hugging him stopped him, utterly.

“You are my friend,” Regulus whispered to him. “You are Harry’s father. And sometimes you trust those relationships, and sometimes you don’t, because you seem to fear that we will disapprove of you, what you do or what you say. I think Harry has inherited far more from you than he did from James, blood link or no.”

Then he released his hold, and left Snape standing there, hesitating, deciding whether he should go through the Floo or not.

In the end, he left, and then spent his afternoon brewing Blood-Replenishing Potions. There were some things he was not ready for.

Draco waited alone in the usual abandoned classroom where Candida came to see Harry. She stopped when she saw him, but then appeared to shrug and decide that Draco must have been using the room for some other purpose.

“Where is Black?” she asked, glancing around, as if she thought that Harry would materialize from the walls.

“Busy.” Draco didn’t try to disguise either the pleasure or the drawl in his voice, and that snapped her gaze back to him immediately. “And busy from now on, unless you change your attitude greatly. I’ll speak to you today. Then I’ll send you on to Cupressus Apollonis.”

Candida actually stared with her mouth open. Draco evaluated her in interest. His mother had taught him that people who did that were a dying breed, because it was so easy for some much smarter wizard to aim the Killing Curse down the open throat.

My mother.

Draco shook off the thought impatiently. Narcissa wouldn’t have wanted grief to cripple him when he was dealing with an idiot like this—and Candida was indeed an idiot, given the stupid words she was readying.

“I insist on speaking to Black,” she said, her eyes narrowed and one hand raised as if she would curse him with the power of her fingers alone. Draco didn’t think that would work. He yawned and looked at her while her face grew redder and redder. “We live next to the castle. We are the most likely targets of Voldemort’s next attack. We have a *right* to his attention that people living further away don’t have, because we are more at risk. I represent children who are only beginning to live in the midst of war, Malfoy, and adult wizards and witches who don’t deserve to have their lives cut short because of a lack of information. Tell me where he is, and take me to him now.”

“No,” said Draco, folding his arms. “He’s delegated me to deal with you, because I asked.

“As a matter of fact, there’s *no* proof that you’re the most likely targets of Voldemort’s next attack. Voldemort wants Harry. He’ll go after him first. He may strike Hogsmeade, yes, but he might just as easily attack the school, or another place where one of

Harry's friends or allies is living. That's what Harry's been trying to tell you. No one can be absolutely safe from Voldemort because there's no absolute safety from the most dangerous and most insane wizard in the world.

"You've demanded the impossible from him, and then been angry when he doesn't deliver it?" Draco arched an eyebrow. "How do you think that *helps*? It weighs him down with impossible guilt, and you down with stupid demands instead of things that could actually contribute to the war effort."

"We shouldn't *have* to contribute to the war effort!" Candida yelled at him. "We've *given* enough, blood and lives, and many of us gave up our homes when the vampire queen attacked! That's *enough*, those sacrifices! What did we ever do to Black that we should have to bear part of his burdens, or to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, that he should target us?"

Draco was tempted to bow his head, put a hand on his brow, and shake his head sadly. But, in the end, dramatic gestures would suffice less to teach Candida the error of her ways than calm, cool words would. He arched an eyebrow and stared at her until she had the chance to turn red from embarrassment instead of passion.

"You lived in the same country," he said. "You preferred to leave the duty of defense up to the powerful wizards around you, instead of participating in it yourselves. You became fat and lazy, and you started to think of war as something that happened elsewhere, to other people. And lately, you've snapped and sniped at Harry and stopped him from thinking about either the Ministry *or* ways to defend you because you were so busy insisting on perfect safety.

"How in the world is a country supposed to defend itself when only a few people try to help? When the rest are too busy hiding in their houses or wailing about how something isn't their fault to even pick up a wand? You want perfection. You won't get it out of Harry. You won't get it out of anyone."

"We had thirteen years of peace," Candida whispered. "Why couldn't it have stayed that way?"

"I can hardly believe that you're an adult," Draco observed. "Did you think, for one moment, that that peace would last *forever*? Destroy Voldemort, and another Dark Lord would have risen in his place, eventually, or some other Lord would have decided to come and take over Britain when Dumbledore died." He kept his knowledge of the Pact and its procedures to himself. This woman could barely look out her own windows; she didn't need to know anything about the international confederation of wizards and witches who would, probably, have kept a stranger from establishing himself in Britain. "You can't whimper and whinge and expect that *that* gets things done. When someone as strong as Voldemort arises, there needs to be opposition to him at all levels, the highest to the lowest, the weakest as well as the most strong. Otherwise, we have a single defender who's destroyed, and then where are we, the rest of us, the innocent who don't 'deserve' a war?"

"But he can face it," Candida whispered, her head bowing as if it were the head of a flower loaded with frost. Draco doubted his words had cowed her that much. More likely, the picture he painted was so bleak as to compel her to start thinking about what it would really mean should Harry fall. "We can't."

"Then *learn*." Draco watched in satisfaction as she flinched, a straight line of pain that seemed to travel from her stomach to her shoes. "Harry's offered dueling classes, a system of warnings so that people can let him know when a village is under attack, evacuation to France."

"We don't want to leave," Candida said, face completely lowered now, but the corners of her brow set in stubborn lines. "We just want—we just want things to be the way they were."

"And instead of helping them return to that state, you're moping and whinging taking Harry's time away from problems that *are* problems, instead of the moans of spoiled children who have never had to fight." Draco examined his fingernails for a moment. "Charming."

Candida took a sudden step forward, hands balled. "It's all right for *you*," she snapped. "You know that you'll be protected no matter what happens, because you're so dear to Black. And you came through the attack at the Ministry all right, didn't you? But my sister was nobody to him. And he was there, and she *still died*. And if the rest of us don't protest, don't make ourselves noticed, then he's likely to let us die, too, just so that he can protect the people important to him. We have to play on his sense of guilt, or we'll be abandoned."

Draco stared at her. Then he recovered his voice. "That statement says more about your own selfishness than anything Harry's done. You might leave anyone you didn't personally care about to die. He won't."

"Then how is it that the people who die when he fights are innocent victims, while the people he loves come through again and again?" Candida asked triumphantly, as if that proved something.

Draco half-closed his eyes and shook his head. “I don’t care about your grief the way Harry does,” he said. “I *am*, in fact, the way that you accuse him of being—I don’t give a damn as long as the people I love survive—but I’ve gone through a loss that I don’t blame on him, and if you’ve listened to everything he says and can still believe he’s really like me, you’re blind.”

“What he says to the newspapers is propaganda.” Candida shrugged. “Just attempts to make sure that most people think he’s compassionate, and won’t turn against him.”

“I see no point in talking to you further,” said Draco. He had been tempted to ask why she was begging for Harry’s attention if she really thought him so cold-hearted, but he knew the contradictions in her logic didn’t matter to her. She wanted things to be the way they had been. Nothing less would satisfy her, and it was a longing that could never be gratified.

Harry would have all sorts of reasons and excuses for her, of course—the loss of her sister, the fact that Candida was of the generation that had grown up under Dumbledore’s protection and had never believed she would have to do her own fighting, the proximity of Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. But the fact remained that Draco wasn’t Harry, and that Candida had nothing reasonable in her worldview that he could translate into a political bargain.

“Have your people send a new representative, if they really want to be heard,” he added, to Candida, and swept towards the door of the room.

“Wait!”

Draco turned, wondering if she had something to say that could salvage the situation. He doubted it. Candida was leaning forward, though, one hand extended.

“My people chose me because I was the only one who wanted to come to the castle and speak,” she said. “The rest of them are too terrified to do so. Please. They won’t send another person in my place. They’ll simply huddle in their houses.”

Draco gave a slow, delighted smile. “You should have thought of that before you started to antagonize us,” he said simply. “You’ll be able to speak to Cupressus Apollonis in a few days.”

He turned away and shut the door on her further words, then. He had no use for those who refused to admit their mistakes, whose lives were an endless series of weepings and wailings and complaints and hopes that someone else would take up the slack.

“For the last time, I think we have everything.” Harry tried to keep the tense snap in his voice down, but it was hard. Snape had made him go over five different ways to react to any treachery on Juniper’s part, including an unexpected Portkey, an attack by the Aurors who would be at their meeting, and a sudden use of the phoenix web or other powerful Light binding spell.

Snape shook his head. “And I still do not think we should be attending this meeting at all.”

“You’ve made that *very clear*.” Harry bared his teeth. “We’re going, sir. You and Draco will be with me, and Regulus, and the sworn companions just out of sight. It would be *stupid* for Juniper to try anything, especially since he *knows* that I’m the only one who can defeat Voldemort.”

“Juniper *is* stupid,” Draco pointed out, leaning against Harry and patting his other shoulder. “So of course he’ll try something. But we have enough power on our side to counter whatever he tries.”

Harry opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. That might mean that Draco was going to read the minds of the Aurors present at the meeting. If that was the case, then he didn’t want to know it. Life was much easier when he allowed the Slytherins around him to do what they needed to do.

Life would be much easier if I acted more Slytherin at times, too.

Harry pushed that thought away. He was still devoted to keeping his peacetime morals as intact as possible. Corruption could wait. “Let’s go, then,” he said determinedly, facing the Forbidden Forest. They had come out to the end of the Hogsmeade road, as usual, to Apparate to the agreed-upon location with Juniper. Harry could see a few people watching them from the edge of the village. Their faces were pale and desperate. He found himself watching them and wondering what they thought of this, whether they hated him or not.

Then he shrugged the notion impatiently away. *What does that matter? It's only idiots like Juniper who want to be universally beloved.*

The disorientation of Apparition seized him, and then they were standing on the wide field that had been, as Snape informed him when Juniper suggested it, the scene of a major battle in the First War. Harry wasn't sure what implications to read from that, other than the fact that the Light had won the battle, and Juniper might be seeking to relive the victory through his own actions.

The day was open and windswept, though dark with clouds that looked ready to drop snow. Harry could see Juniper and his guards immediately, ten or fifteen Aurors gathered around him. Cupressus stood not far away from them, arranged halfway between as a supposedly neutral party—both a member of the Order of the Firebird and Harry's ally. He faced Harry and gave a nod of welcome.

Harry could feel his shoulders tense. Cupressus had agreed that he would shake his head if he believed Juniper to be innocent, and nod if he thought there was something wrong.

But then, that only made part of Harry more eager to finish this. He had squeezed the amulet and summoned Rita as soon as he had a good idea of the meeting place. She would be waiting nearby with a photographer and her Quick-Quotes Quill. If something happened, she would record the event immediately and make it clear to the *Prophet* and its readers that Harry was the wronged party.

He came nearer to the Acting Minister, and nodded. "Hello, sir. You said that you wanted to make peace with me?"

Juniper's eyes locked on him. Harry didn't miss the gleam of satisfaction in them. He felt his own gleam of sadness. Juniper really couldn't lie to save his own life, could he?

"I do," said Juniper. "I do not think that our people should be divided when we have such a formidable enemy to fight." He gestured to the Auror who stood beside him, and the man, moving slowly and carefully so that Harry could see every motion before he made it, drew out a scroll tied with blue ribbon from his cloak. "This is a treaty that, once signed, will bind us both to obey the same laws, and to accord each other the same measure of honor and respect. It also makes us allies beyond doubt in the war against You-Know-Who."

Harry didn't need Draco's hand tightening on his shoulder to let him know there was something suspicious about the treaty. For one thing, the ribbon should really have been green, the color of spring and thus of reconciliation, if Juniper was following the oldest Light customs.

"Let me see the scroll," he murmured, and floated it away from the Auror's hand before anyone could object.

Almost at once, he felt a salty, sour tang to the magic around the scroll. He wrinkled his nose and undid the ribbon, shaking it out at a distance from him to read it. It looked legitimate, filled with archaic and legal language, but given the Auror and the ribbon, Cupressus and the taint to the magic, Harry knew there must be something wrong with it. He just couldn't figure out what, yet.

Draco leaned forward as if reading the scroll over his shoulder. Into Harry's ear, he whispered, "It's a version of the silver collar that they used to bind Fudge's Hounds. Transfigured. Put it on you, and the person who holds the gem that Juniper's carrying right now controls your magic and your mind."

Harry tried to breathe through the sheer rush of dizzying *rage* that descended on him. He wasn't sure what angered him more, actually: the idea that Juniper still did not grasp what was important in the wake of the Ministry's destruction, or the idea that, even now, he would try to bind a *vates*.

But they still needed to trigger the trap so that Rita could capture it. Accusations wouldn't look good at all, particularly if they had to admit to relying on Draco's possession gift or Snape's Legilimency to get their evidence.

He raised his eyes to Juniper's, calming his hatred, and said, "It looks in order. May I have a quill, sir?"

Juniper's eyes lit up as he handed the quill over. Harry understood, then. He was probably going to activate the spell the moment he signed, or else there was a provision in the contract that made it seem Harry would accept the collar willingly. Then it would Transfigure back into silver and snap around his neck.

So Harry had to be careful.

He placed the quill against the parchment, and, in a silence tense for him and at least five other people, he began to sign. *Harry*

went on the parchment, which quivered beneath his hands, and then he began *Potter*.

He'd just started the curve of the *P* when the scroll moved.

Harry acted at the same time, opening the gullet of his *absorbere* gift and draining just enough of the magic from the changing collar that it couldn't snap shut around his throat, while still giving it enough to let it complete the transformation. A moment later, the collar lunged at him, opening and closing like the jaws of a maddened dog, and Juniper lifted a gem above his head with a triumphant yell—

Only to pause when he realized Harry was clutching the straining collar in one hand and watching him with cold eyes, and that the dazzling flashes of a camera were exploding to the left.

Harry was watching. He saw the moment when true despair settled into Juniper's eyes. This was making an impact on him in a way that not even the fall of the Ministry had, at least for the moment. Maybe it had been the last plan he felt capable of coming up with. Harry didn't know.

He *did* know that this was the end of Juniper's usefulness as a figurehead. If he would betray the person he had to work with to secure the future against Voldemort, he was not useful, in any sense, as a leader.

The other Aurors, apart from the one who had handed Juniper the scroll, suddenly moved, and closed in on the Acting Minister and his assistant. That Auror tried to fight his way free, but they had him disarmed and subdued soon enough.

All the while, the camera clicked and flashed.

And Harry went on staring into Juniper's eyes, watching the knowledge of defeat penetrate the man's brain at last, and feeling Draco's hand on his shoulder, and trying to drown the dull throbs of both satisfaction—it would be easier, now, without Juniper's dead weight around his neck—and disappointment—he could hardly believe that such stupid people existed in the world.

~*~*~*~*