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Chapter Fifty-One: Destruction Laughing

The wild Dark laughed above the world, and Kanerva Stormgale laughed with it.

She had given herself over to the wild Dark when she first realized the extent of its loathing for the world. She felt the same way herself. She gazed down at houses and coastlines, lakes and hills, from her height, and she thought of winds smashing them and drowning them in the oceans. Most of all, though, she thought of them ceasing to exist, as a fine black oblivion took them all.

She wanted that. The wild Dark would spread a destruction finer than any she could conceive, finer than wine, in every direction. She would cease to exist along with everything else. She would go down in peace.

And that was what the wild Dark promised now, as it had not even back two Midwinters ago, when Kanerva had lent it her strength as it raged above Britain. Let the longest night come, and things *would* cease to exist. It told her that, and then it laughed, and Kanerva laughed back, because to love it she did not have to trust it.

She vaulted among the clouds, and sang aloud. She felt her winds racing around her in a tightening cocoon, and she put a hand out, running it down and over and through their smooth bonds. They tied her so tightly she could hardly move, and then parted and spun her out again. She knew that the wild Dark was behind that, trying to make her afraid, testing her resolve.

Kanerva would never be afraid of it again, though. Twenty-five years ago, she had stood on a rocky promontory above the ocean and stared down into the black water. It was the moment she had come to full power, and she knew she had the choice of giving herself over to this incredible strength, or casting herself into the ocean and ending her life right then and there.

She had chosen the wild Dark. Anxious as she was to pass away, suicide into the ocean waves would be imperfect for her. She wanted the wild Dark to do it. She wanted oblivion complete and perfect. Nothing of her must survive when the moment of death came, because she wanted it that way.

She had tried and tried to tell Jing-Xi and Harry the truth of that. Jing-Xi only looked at her with wide, sad eyes. Kanerva thought she understood, sometimes, but she had still brought Kanerva along to aid Britain, so perhaps she did not.

And Harry! Kanerva shook her head and whipped around a rising column of air, then descended it towards the earth until it threatened to bear her out of the wild Dark's sphere of influence. The boy still thought of loyalty first. When someone held a different belief from himself, he thought first of persuasion. He did not understand those, like Kanerva and the wild Dark, whose ultimate ambition was the destruction of the world, and of all the possibilities he held so dear.

Kanerva was fond of him. She could admit that without disgracing herself, or turning against her principles. And when Midwinter came, she would fight for him, because Voldemort dared call himself Dark Lord, as if he were the only one, and play with the force she served.

But she would not stand in the way of the wild Dark as it moved to claim Harry's soul. That was a mystery Harry did not understand, could not permit himself to understand as long as he loved someone else: the mystery of perfect destruction.

High above Britain, destruction laughed, and Kanerva laughed with it.

The Daily Prophet

December 4th, 1997

ACTING MINISTER JUNIPER DISGRACED:

Tries to capture vates with child's trick

By: Rita Skeeter

Thanks to an anonymous warning, this reporter was present at the meeting of Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper and vates Harry Black this afternoon. The meeting was described as an attempt at reconciliation and establishing ties between wizards who until today were often described as hating each other.

The reconciliation did not work. When the vates began to sign the treaty, it rose, Transfigured, and attacked him.

It turned out that the Acting Minister was using a variation of a silver collar last seen controlling those whom Minister Fudge called the Hounds, who were his loyal hunters of Dark magic. Had Black signed out his full and true name, as per a provision in the treaty, he would have agreed to his own captivity, and the Acting Minister would have assumed control of his magic and mind via a gem linked to the collar. It is Light, if only by the slimmest of margins, claiming as it does to respect the target's free will and own decision to become a captive and a slave.

The Aurors with Acting Minister Juniper, all but the unfortunately-named Jason Duckworth, turned on their former leader when they found out what he had done. Juniper is now under house arrest in an undisclosed location, awaiting evacuation to France.

The vates has said that he does not intend to charge Juniper with a crime. "What he did has been tried before and failed," he said, looking extraordinarily composed as he gave the orders for the Acting Minister's transportation. "One has to feel sorry for him, really."

When asked if the Light still has power in the new coalition government that he is helping to set up, Black raised an eyebrow. "Of course. Cupressus Apollonis, among others, has offered his assistance and been accepted. He is the new leader of the Irish part of the alliance, while Miriam Smith has agreed to lead the British half."

The vates went on to warn those who might wish to flee that they would be better off doing it as soon as possible. He said that matters become more and more dangerous as we move closer to Midwinter.

"It's the night of longest darkness," he said. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you what [You-Know-Who] might have planned for then."

Cupressus smoothed the paper flat with one hand, and read the article's opening paragraphs one more time. It was the first time in days that the *Prophet* had been allowed to enter his house without having the writing in its lead article adjusted to something less inflammatory.

Of course, for those who might have been angry about or doubted the wording, there was always the picture, which Skeeter's photograph had snapped at the exact correct moment. Juniper was lunging forward, his hand raised above his head, his mouth open, and then staggering to a stop when Harry grasped the collar a few inches from his throat and fixed him with a cold eye. The next moment, the Aurors fell on him like a folding flower.

Cupressus was determined to keep an eye on some of those Aurors. Some of them would have been waiting, sure that Harry would win, but ready to follow Juniper if he did not. Let the danger grow too great, and they might abandon their new posts on Harry's side. They could use wizards trained in combat, but not if those wizards were going to run from the enemies they were supposed to defend the helpless against.

He leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head, and studied the far window of his home thoughtfully. There was the emptiness at his side where Ignifer should have been. He was trying to learn to ignore it.

He was learning to ignore many things that might have mattered to him, truly, because the sheer continued existence of the Light in Britain and Ireland mattered more to him than they did. Once, he would have disdained to lend Harry his assistance if he found the man dying at the side of the road. He had seemed dangerous, the embodiment not of Darkness but of the permissiveness that had allowed the Dark to achieve the position of power it had. Cupressus could not deny how strongly Harry had fought against Voldemort. At the same time, though, why would he not demand more from those who followed him? The ones like Cupressus who would refuse him outright were rare. He could have grown into a much stronger force if he would sometimes make demands, instead of accepting the first answers that his people gave him.

And then Minister Scrimgeour had been killed.

That had taken a large part of Cupressus's personal enmity into the grave with him. Death was the harshest punishment he could ask for for the crime of having invaded his house and believing that he had abused his own child. And he had joined Erasmus fully because the man had moved fast, faster than Cupressus could have, to gain the Minister's office, and had seemed, for a few shining days, the best choice to both lead the Ministry and make sure the side of the Light survived.

And then Erasmus had turned out to be useless in war situations, in situations for which he did not have plans already laid, in situations where he did not have a more or less equal opposition to test himself against. Scrimgeour had been far more his equal than Harry or Voldemort were. So Cupressus had questioned his definition of Light, and learned it was far too impractical and too

old-fashioned to survive and grow in the modern British Isles.

He'd sworn the oaths of the Order of the Firebird because he could keep them, but the Order would never grow. There were too many people who could not give their lives to it, could not believe in it. And that was well enough for Cupressus. By then, he'd already been detaching his cart from Juniper's star, and begun to hitch it to Harry's. Why not? The issue of his personal grievances against the boy—far more of which were actually lodged in Ignifer and Scrimgeour—was nothing compared to the fact that he must defend the Light or it would be lost.

And the Light would survive now. Cupressus was certain of that. He would do his best to make sure that the Light had its own place in the *vates's* councils, even after Voldemort went down to death and the world became more or less normal again. They were making progress towards creating a provisional government, using the model that Harry had established of the defensive network between villages. Those willing to help could do anything, from covering escapes to French ships and Apparition points to watching those most vulnerable to Death Eater recruitment. The loss of the Ministry was devastating, but Britain was slowly overcoming it and moving on.

That was primarily what made Cupressus scornful of the letter he had received today, written on thick, creamy parchment and sealed with the symbol of the International Confederation of Warlocks.

They should have looked more carefully at the political situation before they bothered to send this to him. *Really*. Thinking they could play on the ancient rivalry between Britain and Ireland to serve their own ends, instead of checking to see whether the current leaders cared more about that rivalry than the war? Thinking that most people around Harry saw him as an abused child, just because Juniper had?

Cupressus had already made a copy to pass along to Harry, one that would arrive at the school soon. It suited him that it would be borne by the same owl who had carried his test messages asking Harry simple questions, trying to see how he would react. He had acted how Cupressus expected him to, and that had been one of the middle signs that showed Cupressus the right road to follow.

He set down to write a relatively polite letter to the Confederation, listening, meanwhile, to the way that his house's wards shifted and rang in the sunlight. In another corner of the house, Artemis was singing. Cupressus could only hear snatches of the voice, but he knew the song, the ancient Latin words and the breaths and pauses that his wife took to get around them. This was a song she had sung every day at this time for years, a song that many Light witches had once used to anchor the blessings of the sun to their homes.

Such traditions were larger and more precious than merely personal rivalries, and though he disliked doing it, Cupressus could work with people he found distasteful—and some people he had tested and found good, such as Harry—to preserve them.

A pity the Confederation does not understand that.

Indigena frowned in concentration, and closed her eyes. What her Lord had asked her little garden to produce this time was harder, since it was not living. A narcissus flower, a copy of her cousin Feldspar's body—those she could produce without much trouble. But this would only be incidentally living, a hammer made of hardened, dead material like bone and horn. She would have to grow it, and then make it die, and then harden it enough to crush stone.

She became aware of a presence on the edge of her garden, but she ignored it for the moment. If it were Evan, he would wait. If it was one of the twins, they would realize that her duties for their Lord were more important than interrupting her right away to deliver a message.

The presence lingered, waiting, while Indigena strained, and strained, and finally achieved something that was what her Lord wanted, though Merlin knew it wasn't the most beautiful thing she'd ever made. She couldn't resist adding the rainbow of a mother-of-pearl sheen to it, though. Who cared? Well, she did. Not many people would see it as punched through the rock, and her Lord would only stare with dead eyes if she asked him about it, so Indigena thought she might as well please herself.

When she looked up, she stared. The presence that waited on the edge of her garden was the shimmering silvery shape of Aurora Whitestag's ghost.

Indigena regarded her carefully. Had she come to take her revenge? It was stupid of her to risk her existence like this, if so. Indigena stood in the sanctuary of her garden, among plants she had bred, on earth she had filled with her presence. Aurora could spend her strength here without managing to tear a plant from the soil. Yes, she might frost them, but Indigena had twined more plants within herself that kept their flowers later in the year, and so had a better resistance to that tactic now.

Aurora skimmed nearer and nearer, the trailing edge of her robe brushing just over the crisp snow that lay everywhere on the ridge but Indigena's garden. Indigena watched her come, her hand lightly clenched around the edge of the shining hammer.

"Did you know," said Aurora conversationally, stopping a few feet away from Indigena, "that I died thinking of how I could be useful in stopping you? That doesn't have to mean that I kill you to take my revenge. It could just mean that I *stop* you." She smiled dreamily, as if she knew something Indigena didn't.

"I realize that," Indigena said quietly. "I understand what might make a person return as a ghost."

"Did you like killing me?" Aurora demanded.

Indigena shook her head. "But it seems my fate to be involved in the deaths of people I have come to respect."

Aurora snorted and folded her arms. She looked younger, as she had since she returned from the dead. Indigena wondered if this was what she had really been like, so driven and so passionate, when she was in her twenties, or if this was an ideal imagining. "Fate? It's not fate. It's your stupid honor debt, the perversion of your word. If you would give that up, many people in the world would be happier." She eyed the hammer in Indigena's hand as if she knew what it was for. She probably did. She could have come near, undetectably, and listened to Indigena and her Lord's plans for Midwinter. Ghosts born as vengeance spirits had powers like that, though much more limited powers to make use of what they heard.

Indigena shrugged. "Honor is important to me in ways that you will never understand."

"That puts you to sleep at night, I'm sure." Aurora brushed her hair out of her eyes. "But do you think that anyone else out there believes it?"

"Becoming a ghost has not made you the fount of all wisdom." Indigena stooped to slip a vine from around the hammer's handle, and murmur thanks to her plant. It rustled in exhaustion, then pulled its leaves in on itself and went to sleep. Indigena doubted she would gain any more from it this year.

"So you don't care what other people think of you?" Aurora floated along the outside of the garden like a rag borne on the wind.

"Very good. Perhaps you can learn wisdom, if you were not made with it." Indigena hefted the hammer thoughtfully. She would have to have a strong vine to carry it, but considering what the Midwinter attack was designed to do, she would have had to use strong vines in any case. She started towards the mouth of the burrow, carrying the hammer. Aurora drifted after her.

She didn't attack when Indigena crossed the border of the garden, to her vague surprise. She paused and studied the ghost, who simply drifted a bit closer and opened her mouth as if to make a joke of eating Indigena's hair.

"What do you want?" Indigena asked softly.

That made Aurora ripple like a reflection in a pool broken by a tossed stone. Indigena decided it probably came from laughter she couldn't hear. "You know what I want," said Aurora, when she returned to herself. "You know the reason for what I was thinking when I died."

Indigena nodded. "I was simply thinking that the war is likely to kill me before you get a chance."

"So many more things can be done than death," said Aurora, her eyes half-lidded. "Just as so many other things can be done *with* death." And with that, she turned to a frosty smear on the air, and was gone.

Indigena shrugged and went into the burrow, dragging the hammer along with her. She could feel the earth's dull protest as the head carved a groove into it, but its voice was faint and weak now, after so many days of occupation by Voldemort and his magic. At least Indigena's forays into the open air sustained her tolerance for coming back down into this stifling warmth and power.

Her Lord looked up from the throne on which he sat. Small scarlet windows occupied the places where his ruined eyes had once rested. Indigena couldn't tell if they were a gift from the wild Dark, or a consequence of his own increasing power. She didn't know exactly how they worked, what he saw. She didn't want to know. She kept her eyes averted from her Lord most of the time, in any case, just because she didn't want his Legilimency slipping under the surface of her thoughts and discovering how disloyal she actually was. Plotting to destroy two of the three servants left to him would count as disloyal, Indigena guessed.

"This is our weapon, my Lord," she said, and hefted the hammer. The handle was packed with vines, as much like a stem as it

could be. That was her concession to the living forces that had produced it, almost the only one.

Her Lord, of course, floated it lightly over to him and studied it. Indigena stood tamely in front of him, meanwhile, her eyes on the floor, awaiting a random order to kneel. Her Lord's brain had seemed more and more scattered and scrambled ever since they returned from the attack on the Ministry.

"You have done well, Indigena," said her Lord at last. "What would you like as a reward?"

She nearly glanced up in her startlement. He had never said anything about that before. "My Lord," she said, confused, "you know the reason I serve. Fulfilling my honor debt and having my garden is enough for me. I did not come to you to achieve overarching ambitions or even protect the existence of blood magic and unwilling sacrifice in the wizarding world, as Sylvan and Oaken did. I am content with things as they are."

Silence. Indigena stood still, wondering if this was the last moment of her existence. It would be odd, if so. She had never imagined her Lord might kill her for being unable to answer a question.

Then he said, his voice soft as the earth once had been before first winter and then magic pounded it with storms, "You shall have of me whatever you desire, Indigena. You are the only one who has been loyal, the only servant in all the years I have lived who would have found me, healed me, and stood by me as I began my return to leadership of the wizarding world."

Indigena remembered how he had looked when she found him, and the way that he had sometimes thrashed and screamed during the long months when they could do nothing but study plans in books and send dreams to a few former Death Eaters. It was strange, but then, when he most needed her, when her abandonment would have meant his destruction, she had never once considered abandoning him. The honor debt had been strong enough then, she believed, to compel her to stay with him forever.

Strange how things have changed. Strange that if I saw him in that state again, I would stand beside him still.

When her Lord reached out and clasped her hand, Indigena did not resist. She could ask herself all the questions she liked, but some questions did not have an answer.

Poppy caught her eye across the table and scowled. Minerva scowled back. Poppy didn't think she should be on her feet and addressing the school yet, but it would be best if this message came from her and not from Severus. Besides, an invalid Headmistress, constantly lingering between life and death's door according to the rumors, would hardly inspire the confidence that, as Poppy had pointed out, people needed to have in Hogwarts.

Minerva cleared her throat, feeling the expectant eyes on her from all five tables—for her own professors stared, too, wanting some measure of reassurance or denial—and began.

"We approach the darkest night of the year," she said quietly, "and the time of the Dark's greatest power. We must make a decision on your safety. I know that some of your parents have already agreed that you must not return for the winter term." Mulish expressions sprouted on their faces at that. Minerva wondered how many would sneak away from their parents after Christmas holidays and insure that they returned for the winter. She was sure many of the sixth-years, particularly those who had seventeenth birthdays in the next few months, already planned to. "But others are worried that their own homes are far too easy targets for Voldemort's wrath, and trust to the protection of the wards, or dislike the quality of education in whatever country they have fled to. I will require every student to sign his or her name to one of four lists when this meal is over: those who do not intend to return for the next term, those who will go home for the Christmas holidays but return when they are done, those who intend to remain in Hogwarts over Midwinter, and those who are legally adults and may decide for themselves."

She sat down, and the meal appeared before them. Minerva ate, noticing that Poppy appeared to be keeping track of both the amount of vegetables and the amount of meat she finished. After Minerva crunched up a carrot while staring into her eyes, the matron finally flushed and looked away.

Minerva turned back to her students, a shudder of protectiveness passing through her. She was not sure what the best decision was, to tell the truth. Many students going away would leave a smaller number for Voldemort to attack—but, on the other hand, they would be more vulnerable in more weakly-warded homes, and many of them were reluctant to leave friends and relatives in danger. The Muggleborn students didn't even have the advantage of going into hiding behind wards, unless they remained at Hogwarts or could find a sympathetic wizarding family to take them in. And that was to say nothing of the numerous people in Hogwarts who were not students, such as the adult wizards and witches Harry had training or coming to him for advice. There was no other base so central and so important to their war effort, now that the Ministry had been destroyed. Try to create one

between now and Midwinter, and they only created a new target for Voldemort to attack, one that could not and would not carry the same heavy protections as Hogwarts in the limited amount of time they had left.

Besides, Harry assured her that the wild Dark was interested in him alone, in his soul, and that Voldemort would almost certainly be aiming to take him down. No, he could not say that Voldemort wouldn't attack Hogsmeade or Hogwarts on the way, but he intended to clash with the older wizard as soon as possible and move the battle to a prepared clearing in the Forest. Kanerva and Jing-Xi had both given their word to fight with him, or defend Hogwarts if necessary.

In the end, she had to leave the choice up to individual students and their families. Some would feel safer in France, or Iceland, or other countries even beyond that, if they had a way to get there and a way to live once they arrived. Others would feel cowardly for running away and leaving a war behind them, or *were* afraid enough to want Hogwarts's wards and thick stone walls between them and Voldemort. Without a Ministry to order her to close the school, Minerva had decided to keep it open, and continue to offer sanctuary.

What most frustrated her was that she would be unable to join in the battle on Midwinter, should one come. Why could the strength of her heart not match the strength of her will?

A few hours after dinner, she checked the lists hung outside the Great Hall. By far the longest ones either said students would be remaining in the safety of Hogwarts or intended to return after the Christmas holidays. Some students whom she knew were not legally adults had signed their names to the adult list.

Minerva did not intend to report them.

To all of us, good luck, and a good Dark night.

Harry studied the net he'd woven under the earth, and nodded. He'd buried it so deeply that Voldemort would have to be *looking* to notice it. It would trap Voldemort if Harry could wound him badly enough, but, more than that, it also would give Harry bursts of strength. He could fight on past wounds that would cripple him, and if Voldemort drained some of his magic, it would not be the beginning of the end.

"What do you think?" he asked, looking up at Jing-Xi. "Do you like my clearing?"

Jing-Xi gave him a faint smile, but her eyes were serious as she stared around the expanse of earth already laden with snow, the trees wrapped in more magic than leaves now, the hard glitter of it all under the nearly full moon. "You are as ready as you can be at this point in time, Harry," she whispered. "But we are facing the wild Dark. There is no reason to be overconfident."

"That, I know," said Harry wryly. "But I don't think I am."

He really didn't think he was, as he focused on the view of the clearing. Traps shone everywhere, but they were traps visible only to someone who practiced at least a bit of Light magic; Kanerva had been consulted, and had admitted she couldn't see them. By the time Voldemort began to *feel* them, it would be too late. Harry would have latched on and started to drain his magic.

And he had—well. He could not call it anything so noble and coherent as a plan to face the wild Dark. It could suffer just as any plan did when battle erupted, and, as Jing-Xi cautioned him to remember, this was the wild Dark, creature of madness. It might decide to do otherwise because otherwise *pleased* it. It wasn't the smartest move to think that he could predict an inhuman, mad force.

But Harry had to act from a human position, and that human position saw patterns and sense in the wild Dark he thought he could use. So, every night for the past two weeks, he had sung from the top of the Astronomy Tower, and either seen or felt the wild Dark's manticore form cooing at him. It liked the phoenix song, fascinated by the Light of it as a child would be by a glittering bauble.

So his plan began from there.

He took a deep breath and shook his head. There were worries, other things that could go wrong, but he would *have* to learn to ignore the nagging possibilities until they manifested as realities. That was the way it was. Draco was right; trying to deal with every tiny problem in the book would make him insane.

A gust of wind swept by overhead, and when he looked up, he could just make out Kanerva, a pale shape as she flew against the belly of the black sky. He wondered what she was laughing about.

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Interlude: Into the Long Dream

November 22nd, 1997

Dear my lady Henrietta:

I still seek your help when Midwinter comes. Will you agree to this? The call that you sent me has not gone unfelt, and shall not go unanswered. But whether I come to the school in the midst of your grief and guilt, or for this larger purpose, to end the life of one who is a forest and one who is a tree, to engage in a dance of five or a dance of two, is a mystery to me so far.

Do not say that you would kill me, my lady. Why would you wish to? For, as the poet has said:

*Yea, they shall say, earth's womb has borne in vain
New things, and never this best thing again;
Borne days and men, borne fruits and wars and wine,
Seasons and songs, but no song more like mine.*

Would you wish to deprive the world of a song like mine, my lady, however much you may hate me? You brought me blueberries.

*In regards to the song,
Evan Rosier.*

November 29th, 1997

I feel no guilt from my rape of you, Evan. Did you think I really did? And if you wish to make my luring of you into a purely personal matter, I can only think that you do not understand the meaning of hatred, and even less, the meaning of darkness. We are Dark wizards, and we hate each other. I told you, once, what that means.

It is you who chose to ignore it.

*I wish you were dead, my dear;
I would give you, had I to give,
Some death too bitter to fear;
It is better to die than live.*

Make it the dance of five, and the death that will kill the forest and the tree.

Because, as you said once, I did give you blueberries.

Henrietta Bulstrode.

December 1st, 1997

My dearest, most bloodthirsty lady, of all mortal women most like a vampire:

You pretend that this is all a matter of hatred and ancient tradition? But I know you. You told me once to smell your arousal when we danced together. I prefer to make it a matter of love. Now, darkness, I will grant you. We cannot move for very darkness when we interact.

*For the crown of our life as it closes
Is darkness, the fruit thereof dust;
No thorns go as deep as a rose's,
And love is more cruel than lust.*

You would always choose the cruelest way, Henrietta. You, therefore, love me. You may not know it, but you do. How else can a woman like you, my Lady of Pain, who would rather rape a man than lie with him, react to me?

*In regards to the pain,
Evan Rosier.*

December 11th, 1997

You are maddened because I understand you, Evan, because I can listen to your talk of love and walk away unmoved, because I am not taken in by you, but take you in instead. You successfully fascinated Harry into worrying about your letters, into taking you seriously as a player of the game. I refuse to be drawn into the same trap, because I know what you are.

And love? There is no love such as you describe in me. Perhaps, once, there was. I must concede that, for in past years I did not know my mind so well. But now the situation has turned.

*I that have slept awake, and you
Sleep, who last year were well awake.
Though love do all that love can do,
My heart will never ache or break
For your heart's sake.*

Think about it, Evan. Think carefully, and you will understand why I am doing this.

Henrietta Bulstrode.

December 12th, 1997

My lady who does not deny she is my lady:

Your quotations of poems are inspired. And now the longest night draws near, less than ten days away now, hovering in the exquisite air. Will you rape me among the ruins, when all falls? I wish you would. I wish you would fling yourself on me, unable to help yourself, and do what you should have done the night that I first tried to take you and you took me instead.

The night that you tied our fates together.

*One girds himself to serve another,
Whose father was the dust, whose mother
The little dead red worm therein;
They find no fruit of things they cherish;
The goodness of a man shall perish,
It shall be one thing with his sin.*

This is more than you think, my lady, more than quotations can embody or raspberries can end.

*In regards to fate,
Evan Rosier.*

December 20th, 1997

Fate is nothing to me, Evan. There is only one thing I want from you, and in the end it shall come to me, because you don't know what I want, because you fling yourself headlong into the net, because you cannot help yourself.

*Be the ways of thy giving
As mine were to thee;
The free life of thy living,
Be the gift of it free;
Not as servant to lord, nor as master to slave, shalt thou give thee to me.*

Come, then, Evan. Let it be the dance of five. And then let our dance of two, and the manner of giving you will never understand until it is too late, commence.

Remember, dear one, that I am tame to no man's hand.

Henrietta Bulstrode.

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Chapter Fifty-Two: Scything

Indigena closed her eyes for a moment. Wind whipped past her, stirring ragged trails and tatter-ends of snow through the air, but as long as she didn't have to see it, she could pretend Midwinter wasn't there, wasn't happening.

Except that it was.

She opened her eyes, but turned around so that she was looking at the vines that coiled in the mouth of the burrow. They were her toughest and strongest, not single plants but many strands braided together, and they writhed and curled around each other as she looked them. One supported the enormous weight of the horn hammer she'd grown in her garden a few weeks ago, and others carried secondary weapons that she would need. Indigena stroked the head of one, and smiled in helpless wonder as it curled a tendril around to lick at her palm.

"We go, Indigena."

She faced forward and nodded again as she looked at her Lord. Her bad mood had calmed. So long as her green darlings existed in the world, she could pretend that everything would be all right.

She walked, with the vines slithering behind her like a passel of snakes, towards Sylvan and Oaken. Sylvan was the one in this world right now. He gave her a dark smile that contrasted with the dreamy haze in his green eyes.

"Do you think our Lord would let us have the Malfoy child?" he whispered. "We wish to repay him for hurting us."

"So long as you hurt his body and not his magic, I don't see why not." Indigena waggled her fingers in a specific signal. The vines curled up and around her shoulders, carefully shifting so that they could balance the hammer and her as well as their own green weight. From the very faintly impressed expression on Sylvan's face, Indigena supposed she had disappeared behind a wall of plants.

"You remember what our Lord told you?" she demanded. "Wait until the right moment, go to the Headmistress's office first, and do not, on any condition whatsoever, hurt Connor Potter?"

"We know," said Sylvan, his voice faintly echoed as Oaken began to appear in his place. "Of course we know. It would be easier if we could capture the boy and hold him until our Lord needs him, you know."

"You must ask him about that," Indigena murmured, and then closed her eyes and, keeping careful track of all the additions to her body, Apparated.

Harry was standing on the top of the Astronomy Tower, staring into the sky, when he saw the moon go out. One moment it gleamed above him, a waning crescent; the next, it was simply gone, as if a trailing wing had covered it, or someone had wiped a silver stain from an ebony table.

Harry stepped back from the battlements, his heart pounding hard. He could feel the magic stirring lazily above him. And then Kanerva laughed like a loon behind him, and he knew the wild Dark's assault had come.

"To your station," he snarled, gliding past her.

"I know that." Kanerva laughed again, and then vaulted into the air over the side of the Tower, unraveling as she fell, splinters of white and black and gray and silver that flew towards the four corners of the school. Harry shook his head as he increased his pace. He could only hope that Kanerva would keep her mind *on* the battle, and not flying and wreaking havoc with the wild Dark. But since he needed her power to defend Hogwarts too badly, and he would be fighting Voldemort, he would have to hope that she could concentrate on her own. There was no way to continually check on her and bring her back into line.

He met Jing-Xi on the stairs; she had felt the shifting and stirring of the magical forces even more acutely than he had, perhaps, because she embodied the opposition to them. She gave him a tense nod. "I will remain in the middle of the fourth floor," she

said, "ready to dash to the aid of any student who needs me." Her black hair danced and tangled and lashed around her, moving at least as rapidly as Kanerva's winds. Given that the wind protecting her had been a gift from Kanerva, that was not a surprise.

Harry gave her a hasty smile and then slid past. He touched his wrist as he ran and called on Draco, who was in their bedroom at the moment. He'd been scheduled to come up and join Harry in a few minutes, but Slytherin House needed reassurance, and he was the best one to provide it.

The phoenix song warbled, and Draco's voice said, "I can feel it coming, Harry. What are you doing?"

"Going out in front of the school to battle Voldemort, of course," said Harry. "*Stay inside the school, Draco.*"

Draco was quiet. This was something they'd avoided talking directly about, because, the few times they'd tried, they'd got into shouting matches. But Harry could feel Draco's mind ticking over, and arriving at the obvious conclusions. He couldn't help in a battle like this, where all the participants would be Lord-level or stronger. He would have to stay inside the school and act like a noncombatant, never mind the stubborn courage that had led him to follow Harry into every battle so far.

No response, and no response, while Harry ran down first one flight of stairs and then another, and then leaped a gap that a moving staircase had designed to give him trouble. Harry snarled the way he had with Kanerva. "Draco, do you hear me? Do I have your word? Or do I have to knock you unconscious and ask Jing-Xi to keep you that way for the duration of the battle?"

"That's compulsion," Draco said, and only the smallness of his voice, the fear seeping from him, prevented Harry from losing his temper completely.

"Draco, so help me—"

"All right," Draco whispered, as if capitulating to the law of gravity. "Yes, Harry, if that's what you need from me right now, then yes."

Harry said, "Thank you," and hoped the depth of emotion in his voice would compensate for the fact that he couldn't kiss Draco from this distance. "Stay safe. I love you."

Draco uttered a murmur that might have been the same thing, but given that tears were choking him now, Harry didn't expect it to be clear. He cut off the communication spell and summoned Connor's attention and voice.

"Stay inside your Tower," he said.

"Harry—"

"I will come back from the grave and haunt you if you don't, I swear."

"Harry—"

"Yes?" Harry had reached the entrance hall. He could feel the prickling burn in his scar, along with the weight of the magic on his shoulders. Voldemort was here, and, from the sense of things, standing and staring at the front doors of the school, summoning Harry with his presence alone, rather than coming inside to find him. Harry gave a silent thanks to Merlin for the Dark Lord's sense of the dramatic.

"Good luck."

"Thank you, Connor. I love you, little brother," Harry said, and heard it back, and then turned around and nodded into a corner alcove hidden near the Great Hall. "*Petrificus Totalus.*"

There came the sound of a body sagging against the stone. Harry waved his hand, and Snape floated into view, utterly frozen, his eyes spitting black fire. Harry winced a little at the thought of what would come when the battle was done and his father could let him have a piece of his mind.

That's assuming that you survive this battle, he reminded himself, and then shook his head and reoriented to the present.

"How many times have I told you to stay here?" he asked rhetorically. "I understand that you consider yourself my father, but you need to listen to me as a battle commander. Just so you know, Draco and Connor are acting more like adults than you are right now." He flicked his hand, and laid Snape carefully down on the stones, so that there was no chance he would fall over and hurt

himself. "Now hopefully that will be enough to make you *stay* there. And I love you, sir, but for Merlin's *sake*."

And he turned and made for the doors.

Draco put his head in his hands and breathed for a long moment. He didn't want to think of Harry going into danger without him. He *wouldn't* think of Harry going into danger without him. He—

Oh, fuck, Harry was going into danger without him.

Draco clenched one hand on his arm and seized a bit of skin, then pinched it, hard. He would have to have something to occupy his attention while his not-quite-joined partner went into battle, and this was better than pacing or yelling at the first-years huddling near his door.

Of course, he *could* do something even more useful, if he could only overcome the image of Harry, very small and very brave, going out to face a towering, titanic power.

There were still people in Slytherin who needed reassurance, especially those whose closest contact with the war was rumors and tales and the sight of grim-faced adult wizards and witches in dueling classes. And Draco could make sure they knew the way to the escape tunnel, the one Connor had trapped with Neville's lilies, in case something happened. They had drilled on a way to find it again and again, but it might not have been enough.

He stood and opened the door of his bedroom. He surprised a first-year boy just about to knock. The boy squeaked and tucked his hands together behind his back, as if to prove he wasn't touching anything.

Draco sought the name in the recesses of his imagination, and finally found it. "Malachi," he said. "Did you need something?"

"I—we just hoped that you could show us the way to escape if we needed it." Malachi swallowed convulsively. "One more time."

Draco smiled at him, and, cheered, the little boy smiled back. "I was just coming to show you that," Draco said. "Come on, we'll need to line up in front of the door to the Slytherin common room..."

"Promise me," said Connor, taking Parvati's hand in his and holding it to his lips, "that if something happens to me, if I fall, you'll get the other Gryffindors out of the Tower alive."

Parvati shifted and stared up at him from beneath her eyelashes, a trick that usually got her away from whatever it was that Connor wanted her to promise. Not this time, though, and after a moment of gazing like that, she looked away from him, her hand tightening uneasily. "Connor—"

"Promise me," said Connor again. He didn't feel frightened, even though he knew he was discussing his possible death. He felt as if a golden wind were blowing through him instead, the consciousness and the *sureness* that other people's lives were more important than his own. He wondered if this was the way Harry felt all the time. If so, Connor couldn't really blame him for the way he'd acted when people had died on his watch, and for his insistence that Connor, Draco, and others he loved remain inside the walls of the school while he went forth to battle with Voldemort. "I'll be dead, Parvati, and you won't be able to help me anyway. Promise me."

And then she ducked her head and nodded, and Connor felt badly for having to push her. He took her in his arms and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, feeling his arms ache and tremble with the urge to crush her close and never let her go.

And then Harry met Voldemort.

They could tell from the way the school shook, and then the wild Dark burst into laughter. Parvati cried out and grabbed her ears in pain. So did every other Light-Declared Gryffindor in the common room, which was most of them. Connor made himself keep his hands down, so that he could guide Parvati to a chair when she looked ready to fall over, and gather the others in with a calm, assessing glance.

"Sit down!" he shouted, while the laughter grew deeper and richer. "Remember what we practiced. We have to be ready to leave the Tower if the worst happens."

Most people obeyed him. Those who couldn't, Connor went over and pressed into seats. Then he turned to face the door of the Tower and drew his wand.

He had no guarantees that the wild Dark would come through the door, of course. It just seemed likely, and that was enough to make him face in that direction. He had to face one direction. Why not that one?

His grip tightened on his wand, partially so that he didn't have to imagine his brother facing Voldemort across the battlefield.

Henrietta knew the moment when it came. Of course, she had never imagined that the wild Dark and the Dark Lord would attack *subtly*, but she had not known if there would be a clear signal, either. She could feel the power gathering thickly in her blood for the moment before the storm burst, though, and then the laughter came, and the school shook to its foundations as two powerful wizards met.

Such strength. Such power. Such forces circling and clashing over her head. Henrietta admired them, but she also knew that this was not her battle. She was not a Lady, and she could not match them.

She felt the Light Lady answering the wild Dark, spreading her power throughout the school, safeguarding the Towers and the Slytherin and Hufflepuff common rooms, bracing them against any damage the wild Dark might take it into its head to inflict. Henrietta appreciated that, too, as much as she thought it might not matter. But it was offensive and not defensive battle she was destined for this night.

She touched, once more, the circle of runes she'd created that spelled out E-VA-N, and then turned and strode out of her rooms. The walls trembled constantly around her, and now and then a stone juddered loose. Henrietta rolled her eyes and shook her head. *Unnecessary dramatics. The wild Dark would frighten more people if it had crept up on us, but I suppose that is not its nature.*

She swept out of the hallway and towards the doors of the entrance. She paused when she saw no Evan Rosier waiting for her, though, and raised her eyebrows. She supposed he might be out in the Forest, trying to witness the battle between Harry and Voldemort, or simply exulting in the display of power.

Well, until he brought the three other people to her and began the dance of five, she had nothing else to do. So Henrietta settled in the entrance hall and admired the display of lightning and power through the gaps in the doors. She was so close to the entrance that she would be able to leave very easily.

Harry could feel the boiling rage when he stepped out of the school. Most of it came from Voldemort; the wild Dark's primary emotion, as he knew when he was able to sort out the emotions facing him from the ones in the sky, was still amusement. Kanerva whooped and wheeled and laughed somewhere with it—and kept to her position on the four corners of the school, Harry prayed.

“My heir.”

Harry looked at Voldemort. He had wondered if he would be afraid when this moment came. The man had enough magic to darken the air with a shadow of his own, the way the wild Dark had wiped out the moon, and to make the skin along Harry's arms feel greasy. He also had new eyes, balls of flaming red power that drifted in front of his sockets and sometimes rolled as if they would roam around his face like Moody's magical eye.

But Harry didn't feel afraid. Instead, staring at Voldemort and remembering the Ministry, he simply felt incredibly pissed off.

“Voldemort,” he said, and then he stepped backward and slipped into his lynx form.

Voldemort roared in surprise and outrage, and then Harry turned and ran into the Forbidden Forest, taking the path he'd trotted day and night until the image of it blazed on the back of his eyes, leaping lightly over roots and ducking under the sweeping branches, following the strong centaur scent.

Harry, himself, would have hesitated before he followed his enemy into the Forbidden Forest, or in fact tried to face him on any other battleground than the most appropriate one, the one he himself had chosen. But Voldemort was mighty, and he really did seem to believe that the choice of ground wouldn't make any difference.

He came after Harry like winter. Harry could see already-frosted branches sagging and dying around him, and the grass beneath his paws turned to sere, black ash. He ignored that, and kept running. There was nothing he could do about Voldemort's effect on the Forest, and in any case, what was happening now was still nothing compared to what he could be doing if he had access to Hogwarts, or to the centaurs and Runespoors and other magical creatures who lived here. The grass would grow again, the trees would revive or fall and have new ones planted in their places. Harry already had all the guilt he could handle.

He burst into the clearing he'd trapped, and turned as if exhausted, exaggerating his panting breaths, to face Voldemort. Already, the nets around him gleamed and fired, traps of Light that were perfectly obvious if the wizard had a touch of Light in him, but nor so obvious when one had given his soul to the Dark.

Voldemort burst through the last of the bracken and stood triumphantly regarding him. Heavy wings stretched upward from his hunched shoulders, dripping drops of darkness like the greasy black features of a vulture. His white hands were clawed and crabbed enough to resemble a vulture's claws, too. Harry felt a moment's bitter amusement. His right hand had just graduated from a black-red claw to a fully usable set of fingers a few days ago. Perhaps there was more than one connection between them, making them more than magical ancestor and heir.

Then he shook his head to clear it of such vain imaginings. Of course there was more than one connection between them. That was the whole problem. He crouched low and swished his tail slowly back and forth, then changed to human as Voldemort flung an almost friendly volley of black lightning his way.

Harry leaped above the lightning as he changed. He shouldn't have been able to, but the stored strength in the earth and the magic that shimmered and poured through him now made the impossible possible. As he turned, he caught at his *absorbere* gift. It opened, and in the next moment, as he landed lightly on the earth, he drew sparks from the Light net under the nearest tree, sending up small, biting serpents to sting Voldemort's foot.

Voldemort hissed and drew back from him, eyes darting to try and see what had injured him. In return, Harry snatched a bit of power from him, unraveling it like thread from a spool, and drank it down.

Voldemort's eyes snapped forward, and he gave a slow shake of his head. "Do you really think it will be that easy, my heir?" he asked. "That you can take my magic from me with small distractions?"

"I have something more important than distractions, Tom," said Harry. A faint flush touched that bone-white, noseless face. Harry resisted the urge to fall about laughing. *He still hates his Muggle name so much. How can someone so powerful allow such small things to trouble him?* "Do you want to know what it is?"

"I would be *fascinated*," Voldemort said, and then slammed down a barrier on the tunnel between them, one Harry hadn't felt before. It acted like a sponge backed with steel, absorbing his power towards Voldemort, but not letting any of his enemy's magic through. Harry had to admit he was impressed.

He whistled, though, and the bird appeared, circling above them for a moment before it struck Voldemort a resounding scratch across his left shoulder. Harry was resolved to let the bird do whatever it wanted in the effort to distract Voldemort. Since he couldn't actually hurt it without closing the tunnel or killing Harry, it was one of the best allies Harry had.

"I'm *angry* this time," Harry told him cheerfully. "And I hate you on behalf of other people, not for what you did to me."

"Hatred is hatred, Harry," Voldemort purred, and his eyes widened, and Harry felt a warning tingle in his scar, a moment before Voldemort dissolved the barrier between them in the attempt to call on his loathing.

Harry slammed all his strength into Voldemort at once, attacking with nets from beneath the earth, with his *absorbere* gift, with the sheer weight of all the magic he'd summoned and could use. Voldemort did buckle a bit, in sheer surprise, and Harry reached out and filled his gullet as full as he could of the black wings of magic hovering above Voldemort's shoulders.

He'd practiced, in the weeks since the Ministry attack. He'd swallowed magic from the foulest artifacts Regulus could find, and from Dark spells that Henrietta and Snape had cast for his sake. It was still a struggle to absorb that much magic, like swallowing an entire whale's corpse of tainted flesh, but he had done it. Without the barrier between them, Voldemort's enhanced ability amplified Harry's. He was stronger because his enemy was stronger.

Harry had planned that when he thought of how his visions and Voldemort's own *absorbere* gift had changed after the Dark Lord's resurrection. If his enemy had strengthened because he had, it shouldn't be a one-way track. Harry ought to be able to do the same thing.

And he could.

Voldemort's eyes met his, and Harry saw that the amusement had died out of them. Now he looked ready to kill, and so he lashed forward with his magic, a sweep like a crocodile's tail, or a dragon's extended claws.

It would have killed if it had hit directly, but Harry moved, and it sideswiped him. And then the bird was tearing at Voldemort's right shoulder, and a net beneath the earth captured Harry and towed him in random directions, and Harry let out his own magic, fierce and free and *at last*, and had the pleasure of seeing his enemy stagger.

And so then their battle was joined in earnest.

The wild Dark laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

Kanerva was drunk on it, rolling on it, around it, with it. She could feel the Dark coaxing her to go further, to dip into the maelstrom at the center of the sky and see the oblivion it had readied.

Thoughts of duty, friendship, old obligations, called on her to stay where she was. The power she served danced and tempted her, and called her further on, into the mystery that she had longed to explore ever since the first time she had gazed up at a starless night, ever since she had first stared into the sea.

There was no contest.

Kanerva spread her arms and rolled away from Hogwarts, leaping from wind to wind, knowing that somewhere below the wild Dark had begun an assault on Hogwarts's wards, but not caring. How *could* she care? The whole of the night was before her.

Minerva leaned against her desk and closed her eyes in supreme irritation. Of course, it was understandable that she couldn't go out and help in the battle between Voldemort and Harry. That was a contest for Lord-level wizards, and more people than just her were forbidden from participating in it.

But she could not even patrol the school, and make sure that the students stayed safely in their common rooms and no one had the "grand" idea of watching the battle from a window. Poppy had ruled even that activity too dangerous for her, given the added stress of knowing that a student she loved was battling Voldemort. She had to stay put, in her office, and think and worry and fret, instead of dashing about.

Minerva had tried to explain that "dashing about" would let her express energy and so ease the thinking and worrying and fretting. Poppy had muttered something about "Gryffindors" and refused to hear it.

So little I can do, she thought, clinging to the desk as a tooth-jarring rattle echoed through the stones. *So little I can help*.

And then she gasped and bent double, because something had seized the wards and begun to pull on them at the same moment that something had struck from below, making the school shake. Minerva, connected to the wards, knew there was danger, but not from what. She shook her head and tried to stand, while echoes of shock traveled through her and her heart labored wildly.

"Minerva!"

She looked up sharply as the shade of Godric appeared in front of her. The hair from his head and beard was sticking out wildly. His eyes were so wide that they appeared to have taken over his face. He had a hand extended towards her, for help, but even he wavered and danced like a heat shimmer as another pair of double shocks hit Hogwarts.

Minerva made her voice calm, as she would have with a first-year Gryffindor student who missed her mum. "What is it, Godric?"

"An attack from below." The Founder's shade almost wailed, dancing back and forth. "A hammer smashing the stones. Indigena Yaxley's vines are coming up through the tunnels."

"The tunnels are warded—" Minerva began, and then a blow landed which she knew had taken rocks from the front of the school, and she heard her students screaming, distantly, up the connections of the wards.

“They *were*,” said Godric, and danced again. “The wild Dark is eating the wards, Minerva. And Jing-Xi can’t stop it! She’s not nearly as strong as it is, especially at this time of year.”

“Kanerva?”

“The Lady Stormgale is gone.” In Godric’s voice, for a moment, was the deep disapproval that surrounded his opinion of most Dark wizards.

Minerva ran towards the door, and then stopped, gasping. It wasn’t only the pull of the wards. It felt as if someone had punctured her heart with a pin. Merlin, it hurt. And she could hear the children screaming, and now the wild Dark was scything into the school from above and Indigena Yaxley from below.

If they were not careful, this would be another Ministry all over again.

The Ministry—

Then, it was as if Merlin himself had reached down and placed clarity into her head. Minerva straightened, and breathed deeply. She concentrated on the drawing of air, and did not let even the screams of her students distract her, until she was sure that she was thinking logically, anticipating the consequences of her plan.

“Godric,” she said, and the calm of her voice made him start to attention. “Send Rowena and Helga to guide the children out of the school. The tunnel that Connor and Harry found. Have them take that way.”

“It dives beneath the school,” said Godric, hovering uncertainly.

Minerva gave him a faint smile. “And not as far as Indigena Yaxley is under yet, unless I’m mistaken. In any case, I don’t think we can stop her.” She put a hand over her heart. “If I run, as I’ll have to if I want to escape the school alive, my heart is going to burst, Godric. There’s no Hogwarts anymore, or there won’t be in a very short time—“

Clang, sang the hammers from above and below. Chips of stone pinwheeled past Minerva’s head. From the corner of her eye, she could see the misty shapes that marked Rowena and Helga, one of them racing upward, one diving down. She nodded her satisfaction and returned her eyes to Godric’s openly pleading face.

“Hogwarts will be gone,” she reiterated. “It’s important that we get as many students out alive as we can.” She drew her wand and tapped her left wrist. “Mr. Potter,” she said. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Headmistress.” Connor’s voice was collected, though fierce. Minerva felt a moment’s deep pride in her Gryffindors.

“Get the students out *now*. This is not a drill. The wild Dark is coming, and I will not have the Tower fall on our heads.”

“Yes, Headmistress,” Connor said. “I’ll tell the others.”

“Good. Farewell, Mr. Potter.”

“Headmistress?”

Gently, McGonagall cut the communication spell, and then caught Godric’s questioning eye again. He looked half-desperate, which she could understand. He might have an inkling of what she meant to do, but he could hardly like the idea.

“I’ll die trying to escape, Godric,” she said. Every word fell like its own hammer, and if Indigena Yaxley and the wild Dark continued attacking the school outside her office, Minerva was honestly unaware of it. Every unimportant sensation faded, and she focused solely on the now. “I want to make sure that my death serves a *purpose*, that I don’t die while running away from it but on my feet, facing it.”

“Minerva,” Godric whispered. “What do you plan to do?”

Minerva turned and looked at the Sword of Gryffindor on the wall.

“Minerva,” Godric whispered. “No.”

“Yes,” she said. “He cannot be allowed to have it, do you see? He cannot be allowed to take back this Horcrux, as he will surely

do. If he's attacking the school, that means he does not care about its safety as a hiding place anymore. I would not be surprised if he has detailed Death Eaters to fetch it. It *must* be destroyed, Godric, and the only way for that to happen is for someone to fall on it." Minerva placed a hand over her chest and smiled. Beneath her palm, her heart labored on. "And this old heart—well, it could break in many less appropriate ways."

"Ah, Minerva." Godric sounded helpless. "You—you cannot do this."

The air sparked, and then filled with sweet thunder. Minerva knew that sound, that feeling, from endless descriptions by Harry. A prophecy was coming true.

"Yes, I can," she said. Her fear was entirely gone. Courage had her, the virtue of her House, the legacy of the McGonagall line. "I am going to, Godric. The Unassailable Curse can be broken if someone dies as a willing sacrifice trying to destroy a Horcrux. That is what I intend to do."

"I—"

"I will need someone," said McGonagall serenely, "to fetch Harry when this is done, because he must destroy the shard of Tom Riddle that will come forth from the sword. And I think you can hold and distract that shade, Godric. He can't possess you; you don't have a body. I want you to make sure there is no way he can take mine, in the last moments between life and death."

She locked her eyes with his. "And I will need someone to hold the sword steady."

Godric closed his eyes.

"We are Gryffindors, you and I," Minerva continued. "We understand that sometimes there is no substitute for a sacrifice, that you do what you can. And you know my desire to die on my feet."

He stood there for a long moment.

"It is right that we help get rid of the taint on your sword, you and I," Minerva added. "It was yours, forged for your hand, and I was of the House that produced those who so tortured Harry and contributed to the degradation of the world and the Light in our world. We have a debt to repay."

An endless moment later, and he nodded. He moved behind her desk, opened the glass case, and took out the Sword, carefully solidifying his hands so that he could clutch it. He stepped around the desk and held it, point towards her.

Minerva spent a moment studying the blade. The dark line of evil still ran along the edge. She altered her position, carefully. She remembered an aunt, who had trained with swords, telling her once that it was extraordinarily difficult to stab someone through the heart, because the ribs were in the way, and more often the blade would simply get caught on and scrape along the bone.

She looked with a final smile to Godric, and, holding in mind the thought that she dedicated her death to the destruction of the Horcrux, she ran forward.

The sword impaled her like a stronger version of the pin-puncturing pain she'd felt earlier. Minerva felt it tear through flesh and bone, and then through muscle, and had a moment when she thought she saw the dark face of an older Tom Riddle unfolding from it.

Godric called her name.

And then death came for her, a springing black dog, a curl of prophecy and sweet thunder, the knowledge that she had done something right. She felt herself fall to the floor in the moment before it settled fully.

Thus Gryffindor pays its debts.

Minerva McGonagall died triumphant.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Three: The Fall

Snape gathered his magic and struck against the Body-Bind on himself. It still wouldn't move, but he thought it showed signs of

cracking and weakening in some vulnerable places, such as around his joints.

Rather like the walls.

The entrance hall was swaying and dancing in a way that he'd hoped to never see any of Hogwarts sway and dance, even in an earthquake. Chips and dust, and sometimes larger chunks of stone, regularly fell from the walls now. So far, none had done anything more than graze a line of blood across his temple, but Snape was sure that could not last. Again he flung himself against Harry's Body-Bind, which would have yielded by now if it were the work of any ordinary wizard, and again it cracked but didn't give way.

Then footsteps pounded towards him, and a voice half-shattered from the rush of panting yelled, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

The Body-Bind broke. Snape was on his feet in an instant, though he stumbled as limbs dead from lack of circulation in an awkward position failed to catch him. Regulus's arm curved around his shoulders and held him upright, then began urging him towards the doors of the entrance hall.

"Come on," Regulus breathed. "Let's get out of here."

Snape set his feet. His mind was already racing, perhaps as a result of having more than enough time to consider his situation while he lay under that rippling ceiling, and he knew Harry was safe outside. There were many other people who weren't, however. "No."

"Severus—" Regulus began, in dangerous tones.

"My Slytherins have not yet escaped," Snape snarled at him, and, turning back, cast a stabilizing spell on the nearest wall. It froze, though whirls and puffs of dust still drifted away from it. "I am going to get them out. Whether you help me or abandon them is not my affair." And he began to sprint towards the dungeons, ignoring the words that Regulus muttered under his breath as he ran after him.

"You know," Regulus said, in a grumble that Snape was not entirely sure he was supposed to hear when they reached the staircase, "the only reason I put up with things like this is because I love you."

Snape's shoulders stiffened, but he didn't turn around. There were far more important stakes at the moment than deciding how Regulus had meant that.

And then the wards around him twanged and shrieked, and Snape dropped to one knee. He would have gone pitching headlong down the stairs if Regulus hadn't caught him, this time by the edge of the robe. Snape could hear Regulus asking frantic questions, but he was in no mood to answer them. The wards felt like hot wires stretched across his stomach. Tears of pain glimmered at the edges of his eyes but couldn't make it down his cheeks. Every single bone in his body had become a case of transparent steel filled with molten lead.

He knew what that meant, what it must mean. The wards were connected to Minerva. They would never have turned to him and tried to make him essentially Headmaster of Hogwarts unless—

Unless Minerva was gone.

Snape sank his immediate disbelief and fear into Occlumency pools. He had no time to quarrel with the evidence, either. He *must* get as many students as he could out of Hogwarts.

After all, he was responsible for them now.

He *felt* it.

He *felt* the moment that his Unassailable Curse on the Sword of Gryffindor, the most magnificent of the defenses he had wrought to protect his Horcruxes—the necessary protection when he had left the Sword hanging in a place so full of his enemies—snapped. Someone had run the blade through her heart. Someone had fallen. Someone had broken the curse.

And all around him, in that moment, was the charged thunder of a prophecy, and the Lord Voldemort heard a sound he had not heard in more than a dozen years, since the creation of his last Horcrux: he heard Death laughing, a jackal's howl. A black dog's

shadow passed over the corner of his eye, sweeping along the ground and dancing mockingly over his vision before vanishing.

No. He could not die. He would not die. He was the Lord Voldemort, and he was immortal.

There was still the chance that he could save his Horcrux. The Unassailable Curse had been broken, but the shard of soul had not yet been destroyed. He would enter the Headmistress's office, capture the shard, put it into another object, and carry it away. That object would be only a temporary container, of course, because one *must* have a suitable trophy to hold the shard of soul. But he would find one.

He must, however, withdraw from this useless and dangerous battle with his heir in order to complete his task.

He pulled his magic in and leaped, Apparating through the barriers of the tattered and dying wards to the office. He felt the ripple of excess magic that accompanied him, but did not understand it until he landed and turned.

Harry had Apparated right behind him.

“Get out, *now!*”

Not one Gryffindor who heard him questioned him. Connor was glad for that, at least. They'd drilled endlessly in the Tower for just such a moment as this, and the children's faces were terrified, but they were lining up obediently in front of the door in the wall which would lead them down into the tunnel. Connor was not sure how safe the tunnel was, given the spiderweb cracks traveling between the stones, but he knew that their final destination, beyond the Forbidden Forest, was much safer than the Hogwarts grounds, and he wouldn't want to lead the children out along moving staircases and between tumbling pillars, either.

Parvati snatched up a little girl who stumbled and began crying, and nodded to him. Connor took his place at the back of the line, murmuring comfort to those who needed it, and saying that *of course* Hogwarts would still be standing when they came back after the Christmas holidays, Meredith was silly to think that it wouldn't.

He didn't really believe that, though. In his heart of hearts, Connor knew this was the end.

They ran down the staircase inside the walls, faster, it seemed to Connor, than Parvati's gleam of light had gone when they first explored the tunnel. Down and down, and then Parvati whispered, “Padma,” with relief in his voice as clear as a shout to Connor. They'd arrived at the landing where the tunnel diving from Ravenclaw Tower met the one diving from Gryffindor. Connor nodded briskly to the Ravenclaws he could see, and bit his lip to keep from commenting on anyone missing. He didn't know for sure how many Ravenclaws had stayed for the Christmas holidays, so these might be the only ones left.

Luna, who stood in the front of the line with Padma, brushed her hair from her eyes and gave him a sorrowful smile. “Did you know that the stones had dreams of falling, sometimes?” she whispered. “They thought they were going home, to rest in the earth. They didn't know this would happen.”

“I know,” said Connor, making his voice soothing, and then shouted again. “Now, down the stairs, in single file. Divide up the way we taught you, younger students spaced around the older.”

Again, not a single person questioned him, though Connor saw some with deadly pale faces and some Ravenclaws he knew had caused trouble in the past, like Margaret Parsons, who had tormented Harry and his snake in fifth year. They did as told, and Connor began to entertain a faint sliver of hope that they would all escape alive from the groaning school after all.

Ginny walked past him, holding a first-year in her arms and leading a second-year by the hand. Ron followed with two more second-years, though he'd probably used a Lightening Charm to hold them. Neville gave Connor a nervous smile and touched the whistle around his neck that he could use to control the potted lilies in the tunnel, if necessary. Connor was grateful he'd brought it. He glanced back, counting the number of heads and legs still to pass; he was remaining as rear guard.

And then the stone behind those still arriving gave a tortured *moan*, and began to fall.

“Connor!” he heard Parvati scream.

Connor had no time to do anything but think with his muscles, the way he did when he dived after the Snitch in Quidditch. He let his legs carry him, his hands shoot out and close on the robes of the two children nearest the top of the stairs, and he tugged them violently forward, spilling them to the ground beside him, halfway over the steps, crying out in shock.

There were others he couldn't save, others still screaming and reaching for help, perhaps a quarter of the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws who had remained. The stone came down on top of them, was coming down, was falling.

Connor ducked his head, rolled on top of the two children he'd saved, and cast the strongest *Protego* he knew above them.

He heard rocks bouncing, someone shouting, the walls of the school shaking themselves apart. He didn't care, couldn't care. He threw all his strength and all his heart into the Shield Charm that protected him and his two charges, and thought over and over again that it must not fall.

Cracks ran through the Charm before it was done, but it held. At last Connor raised his head and found himself and the two children on the edge of a sea of stone. Mounded, broken walls lay above them, with a glimpse of starry sky somewhere over the edges. Under the stones was silence, and perhaps a trace of blood. Connor didn't know for certain. He couldn't see those who were crushed.

He turned and looked down the tunnel. Still stable, it seemed. He drew his wand and began to cast Stabilizing Charms at the stones.

"Connor?" Parvati whispered.

"Still alive." Connor steadied his voice, thrust his shock away, and began to concentrate on the living. Gryffindors were good at this, when they needed to be. Give up the lives that you couldn't save to save those you could. The important thing now was not to let people start crying or thinking about how it could have been them, because either would prevent them from moving. They *had* to take charge of those who had managed to escape the fall and get them out of here. "Use Stabilizing Charms on the walls, all of you who know them, and Lightening Charms on your bodies. Luna? Can you talk to the walls, make them hold as steady as they can?"

"I'll try," Luna whispered, and, moving forward, laid a hand over the nearest crack in the stone. "But they are so hurt. I don't know if they'll listen to me."

"Do what you can," said Connor. He felt dust on his lips when he licked them, and a trail of blood running down the side of his face. He couldn't care. He soared above the minor concerns, as Harry would have labeled them, just as Harry would have soared, and focused on the living and their safety.

Draco guided the rest of Slytherin House out the common room door and towards the entrance of the tunnel Harry had shown him by remembering his mother.

She had once received a visit from a witch Draco was sure now belonged to a family who could have killed them. She had risen when the house elves announced her, nodded regally, and then turned to Draco. Her face had been a cool, calm void that left no *time* for fear.

"Draco," she said, "go into your room, and wait."

And because she had looked and sounded like that, Draco had. Narcissa had come to him a half-hour later, and held him silently, but not closely, with one hand stroking his hair. Draco had gazed into her face, afraid to ask what was wrong, but she had finally smiled down at him and shaken her head.

"Nothing to do with us, dearest," she'd murmured.

And it had not been. Draco never heard the witch's name as a guest at Malfoy Manor again. When he heard of the death of the entire family in a strange mass poisoning incident a year later he'd received a glimmer, his first, of the extent of his father's power, and the rage he would go into when he found out someone had confronted and threatened his wife.

Now, Draco clung to the fact that there was too much happening for him to cower in a corner, or even panic about what might have caused the school to fall, or where Harry was, or whether the banging and booming in one corner of the tunnels was coming closer to them or moving further away. He led the children forward. They came into the corridors. They went towards the tunnel, and Draco stood aside to let them enter it, his eyes moving back and forth constantly, his hand on his wand as he fired Stabilizing Charms at the walls and did what he could to slow the breathing of children who looked as if they were about to go into a panic attack. The line emerging from the Slytherin common room was shorter than it should have been. Draco didn't let himself think

about that, either.

“Draco!”

He turned. Snape was stumbling down the corridor towards him, with Regulus Black at his shoulder, looking half-desperate and half-strong.

Draco didn't let himself collapse just because an adult was here, though, since doing that would be to surrender completely. He nodded, as if it were an everyday occurrence to have the school falling around their heads, and stepped away from the wall. “If you want to take up my guard position?” he murmured. “I could do something else. Or would you rather check on other students? As you can see, Slytherin House is moving.”

Snape took a moment to study him. Draco thought it was out of sheer shock at seeing him so well-organized. And then Snape had relaxed, and if there was a gleam of pride in his eyes, it had not stayed long enough for Draco to identify it.

“Keep where you are, Draco,” Snape said steadily. “I have received confirmation that Minerva is dead. As such, I am the Headmaster of Hogwarts now, and I have other duties to attend to.”

Headmaster over a pile of rubble. This was the end. Draco knew it, and he suspected Snape knew it, too, or would if he let himself have the time needed to think about it.

As matters stood, Draco only nodded and turned his attention to herding the students out.

He wouldn't let himself think about Harry, potentially alone, potentially in danger. He wouldn't.

The wild Dark was gone.

Kanerva hovered a mile above the ground, her winds gathered together to form a half-solid body, her head twisting slowly from side to side. As far as she could see, though, the blackness was calm and filled with stars. It didn't at all resemble the dancing, swirling maelstrom that the wild Dark had promised her when it lured her away from the school. It seemed as if her sacrifice of blood or a life wasn't required after all.

That is disappointing.

And more than disappointing. Now that it appeared she had left her post at Hogwarts for nothing, Kanerva was filled with a bit of remorse. She could have stayed where she was and flown with the tame winds around the wards. It would have granted her as much exercise as the futile retreat into the air had.

But perhaps she could turn around and go back. And if she were very, very good, and flew very, very swiftly, then Harry and Jing-Xi and the others might forget she had ever been gone!

Kanerva turned and hurtled back down towards Hogwarts, through a sky gone entirely too soft and strange to suit her.

She *must* stand.

Jing-Xi had come to the reluctant conclusion that there was little she could do to help Harry right now. She certainly could not hold back the wild Dark, or call Kanerva to her, and Minerva was beyond her help. But she could exert her utmost to make sure that the school stood long enough for all the innocents to get out.

She closed her eyes and lifted her hands, her hair, her magic. Breezes scented with blossoms stormed past her. She felt the stone around her waver. It wanted to alter, to answer her and change its nature, but the call of the wild Dark and the hammer beating at the bowels of the school increased the siren song of gravity.

Jing-Xi drew on her magic as she had not done in years, at least since the time she made friends with Kanerva and convinced the young Dark Lady to give her a gift instead of trying to kill her. She whirled it around her head and then threw it away from her, drawing even on the magic that permitted her breath to keep flowing through her lungs, her heart to keep beating. If the stones fell in on her, she would not need to breathe and have her heart beat anyway.

She had become a Light Lady because she wished to help people. First, it had been people in her town alone. Then it had included the students of the wizarding school she attended. Then it had been her country. Then she had discovered the machinations of the Pact and how she could best subtly manipulate them. And now it had increased to take into account the students of a school in Britain.

She might burst her heart, with this magic laboring through her and radiating from her fingers and her heart. But at least then she would know that she had died doing something she loved.

The stone around her answered her call at last, and Transfigured to steel. Jing-Xi fell to her knees in the midst of that shining metal, and let out a sharp breath.

She knew she would not have much time. Though the wild Dark appeared to have abandoned the attack for right now, for unknown reasons, it would probably take her use of Light magic as a challenge and return soon enough. She must move and get those who would be hurt out of the way while she still could. Apart from anything else, she knew the students had practiced escape routes, but the wizards and witches who constantly moved in and out of the school had fewer notions of the best way to leave.

She opened the door, and was gone, to see who most needed her help.

Harry had never *hurt* so intensely. His scar burned like acid, and had ever since Voldemort began their deeper battle. His fingers cramped from digging them into his palms. His gut ached from the physical equivalent of swallowing enough magic to choke him.

And then he had felt the pulsing tug in his scar, and seen Voldemort turn, and reacted without thinking, drawing on the magic that flowed in the tunnel between them to make sure he could follow his Apparition. Voldemort's passage had shredded the last of the anti-Apparition wards around the school, and, riding in his shadow, it had been easy enough for Harry to ignore the tatters that grasped at him.

Strangely, given all his pain, he was still able to take in the situation in front of him at a glance.

McGonagall lay on the floor with the Sword of Gryffindor in her heart. Between her and the desk whirled two shades. One, whom Harry had met before and recognized from the color of his beard and robes, was Godric Gryffindor. The other looked like Voldemort, or someone halfway between Voldemort and an older Tom Riddle, with his features already twisted and marked with the stamp of Dark magic. He kept trying to flow past Godric, and the Founder kept stopping him. He was seeking for a body to possess, Harry guessed, and the fact that Godric was like him both foiled him from possessing the Founder and kept him away from solid objects that he might have been able to infect with his presence.

Of course, Voldemort was there now, and starting to turn towards the battle. And the shade of Tom Riddle dived around Godric and made for Harry, seeing him as the best choice for a body.

Harry didn't have time to think, so he acted. He yanked on the magic between himself and Voldemort, viciously, hard enough to make his own eyes water and his teeth feel as if they were being pulled out with pliers. It hurt, but it worked the way he wanted it to, summoning the bird. It hovered above Voldemort, and then, when Harry asked, dove down, swiping open his forehead with one claw and sending blood flowing into his eyes.

Harry didn't know how long the bird would manage to hold Voldemort, but in any case, he would have to hope it would be long enough. He faced Tom Riddle, still reeling a bit from the backlash of the magic tug, and let the momentum invert into an opening of his *absorbere* gift, locking onto the shard of soul and drinking and draining the magic that kept it alive.

The shade shrieked in horror, and Harry encountered the foulest blockage he'd ever found, like trying to swallow rancid meat and rotten eggs in one go. He didn't let up, though. He'd swallowed a piece of the soul once before, in the Chamber of Secrets, and he would not let the Headmistress's sacrifice on the Sword be for nothing. He gulped, and took the magic inside, and made it a part of himself, even if it did rather sit in the middle of the rest of his magic and jab him with a knife.

The shade let out a horrid howl. Harry could see it struggling to reform, separated from his body by the distance of a few inches. Harry was determined not to let it in. If he did, then the shard of soul would lock him in his mind and manage to force another battle that Harry might not win. Besides, Voldemort could do anything to his body while Harry lay helpless, including kill him.

Harry didn't need a distraction. He had to keep the shade from reaching him at all, had to keep the rest of the battle perfectly poised.

Kanerva bursting through the ceiling of the office to attack Voldemort and his twin coming through the door were exactly the kind of distractions that he didn't need.

Connor came to a stop, gasping, his hand clasped over his forehead. His scar had begun to hurt so furiously that his vision went white with the pain. When he could see again, Parvati was bending over him anxiously, shooing back Padma, who was trying to see.

"Connor?" Parvati whispered. "What is it?"

"Voldemort's in the school," said Connor, and ignored the flinching and moaning that followed his mention of the name. "He's—he's in the Headmistress's office, I think." He wasn't sure how he knew that, but it was like the knowledge he had had of Voldemort's attempts to compel Harry the night he'd flown off the Astronomy Tower; what he knew was more important than the *how* of knowing it. "I've got to get to the office. I *have* to." He shook off Parvati's hand and took an unsteady step towards the wall. "Luna, can you ask the rocks to open for me, please?"

"Wait." Parvati caught his arm. "Connor, we need your help to get the little ones outside."

Connor closed his eyes and shook his head. "You'll have to do it without me," he said. "I'm sorry, Parvati. Something's—wrong. I'm not doing this because I think Harry needs me now more than before. It's pulling. In my scar. I think something important is about to happen, and I think I need to be there."

Parvati might have argued with him more, but Luna had already touched the stones in the side of the wall. They parted, at the same moment as they became shining walls of steel. Luna stared at them and smiled. It was the happiest look that Connor had ever seen on her face.

"That's better," she whispered. "They were so afraid of falling."

"Go on, get them out!" Connor snapped to the others, who were staring at him, and they finally obeyed. Perhaps subjecting them to a few orders earlier had been useful, he thought, in the moment before the tug on his scar intensified and he set off at a clumsy run up the hall.

He thought he heard footsteps following him, but he couldn't look back and see who it was. Besides, that might only be the doubled sound of his own blood rushing in his ears, which *was* awfully loud.

He arrived at the gargoyle finally, which leaped aside when it saw him. Then he was pounding up the moving staircase faster than it could go, and opening the door, and spilling into an office already filled with struggling shapes.

And then things happened as quickly as the down-rush of a dragon.

Indigena spat dirt and looked around surreptitiously. If Sylvan and Oaken saw her angling towards the outside of the school's doors before she could meet Evan and his mysterious other person who would help them with the defeat of the Yaxley twins, she was dead. They would know that her horn hammer was beneath the school, but she wasn't, and they would remember hearing Voldemort order her to that position, and they would become suspicious. Indigena had the excuse that the power of the wild Dark had pressed her away from Hogwarts, even as had happened to them, but Sylvan and Oaken were far too suspicious. They wouldn't accept it.

But then she saw the flash of a familiar dark cloak ahead, and, beneath it, a pair of familiar dark eyes. Evan nodded to her and held up a hand. The next moment, a witch came out of the shaking school and moved towards them.

Indigena lifted an eyebrow when she saw who it was. *Henrietta Bulstrode? Well, of course. I don't know anyone else on the other side of the battle powerful enough and Dark enough to listen to Evan. Or mad enough, come to that. And it would explain his reluctance to tell me who she was.*

"Hello, Yaxley," said Henrietta, with a calm smile that made Indigena raise her estimation of the other woman's madness a notch

or two. She might have been speaking through calm air instead of air thick with screams and stone dust and magic. “Here to help us destroy your cousins?”

Indigena nodded shortly. “It seems that we are on the same side, for the next little while.”

Henrietta shook her head. “We have the same goal,” she said. “But you serve your Lord.” Her eyes lit up with intensely private amusement, as at some good joke. “And I serve no one.”

“What are you doing here?” Sylvan’s voice asked then, from behind them.

Indigena turned. She could feel Evan and Henrietta readying their wands. She had no idea if Sylvan had noticed them yet. Or perhaps—probably—he thought that Indigena and Evan had partnered to remove a threat from Harry’s side.

No such luck, she saw, when she caught a glimpse of her cousin’s face. Still just as suspicious as ever, and he was already drawing his own wand and pulling his cloak in close around his body, to serve as the kind of armor that would turn both spells and werewolf teeth aside.

“Indigena, your vines,” said Evan. His casual tone, as if he were commanding a dog, made Indigena bristle, but she did as he had wanted, snapping her fingers and making a coil of green rise from the grass beneath Sylvan’s feet. Evan had told her they would take the twins on the grass in front of the castle, so Indigena had made sure to send some of her vines slithering beneath it the moment she landed at the edge of Hogwarts’s grounds. The tendrils had halted at the wards, but once the wild Dark had commenced its first attack, they didn’t have any trouble slipping in and threading themselves among the more innocent grasses.

Sylvan let the vines grab him, arching one eyebrow. “You will hurt us, Evan? But you know that we cannot be harmed.”

Evan gave him a distant, dreamy smile that Indigena had to look away from. “Not by most people, no,” he answered. “But by the undoing of the spells that made you invulnerable, you can. And by someone who has spilled as much blood as you have.” His voice grew more and more feral. “The Children’s Massacre, they called it. My initiation. The endless killing I have done in all the years I have been alive. I think it may yet equal your kills, Yaxleys.”

“You cannot know—“

“Henrietta, my dear, sweet love,” Evan said. “Begin.”

Henrietta had stepped forward when Indigena turned around. She had to admit to watching in some curiosity. She had no clue how Henrietta intended to unwind the spells around the pair. She knew the woman was accomplished with runes and Transfiguration, but it was not as if she had the ability that Draco did, to possess her opponents.

Apparently, Henrietta had a certain amount of confidence in her abilities. “I have been reading a book called *The Changes of the Mind*,” she said, in a chirpy voice that also made Indigena shudder. *She and Evan are well made for each other.* “It covers mental Transfiguration. I believe that changing the patterns in my brain so that they correspond to the patterns in yours should be simple enough. I have studied it.”

Indigena stared, her heart pounding. *If that happens, she will change her mind to fit theirs, and she will think as they do, and she will want them to survive—has Evan baited this as a trap?*

A swift glance at Evan did not reassure her. His mouth was slightly parted, just a bit open, and he looked as if he were ready to die of enjoyment. His eyes shone like dark moons.

Henrietta intoned an incantation Indigena didn’t know. She readied her vines to grab Henrietta, just in case they did have a suddenly insane third killer on their hands.

Her face changed, but she laughed, and she still sounded like herself when she said, “Oh. I see. Absurdly simple. It is really the unwilling sacrifices that give the power. The incantations themselves are easy, and easy to work backwards as well.” She nodded to Evan, and held out her arm. “Come here, and I will whisper them in your ear.”

Evan went solemnly over and leaned near her. Indigena could see his body trembling beneath his tattered robes. She wasn’t entirely sure if it was with lust or not. She was sure that she did not want to know what it was.

Henrietta whispered words into his ear, and Evan turned towards Sylvan. Her cousin was struggling in earnest now, Indigena noted. Not that it would do much good. They were immune to *threats*, but the vines holding them were not threats, any more than

ropes or chains in and of themselves were. Nor were the incantations that Evan was now intoning really meant to do harm.

By themselves.

Indigena watched as black coil after coil fell from her cousins. Oaken replaced Sylvan, and the other way around, several times, but they didn't seem able to break free of the trap. That was only fitting. Indigena thought it right, even just, that her cousins should be destroyed by two people as mad as they were.

Because there was no doubt that Henrietta Bulstrode was mad. She let Evan Rosier close enough to her to bite her throat out, and she tilted her head back and smiled at him in between whispers. Her dark eyes were bright with pleasure and power, her long brown curls hanging disheveled over her shoulders, and she might as well have finished fucking him a moment ago. And Evan kept shooting her glances that Indigena had never seen him bestow on another living thing.

Of course, that probably only means that he'll linger over her and make his torture of her a moment to remember.

Via magic that Indigena did not want to understand, sourced in a communion between two debased souls that she could not stand to comprehend, the spells flowed backward, as Sylvan and Oaken had described happening to their Lord the day they were caught by Draco Malfoy and his possession gift. Sylvan screamed and threatened and spoke of their Lord and, near the end, even pleaded. Oaken was silent all the way through, but his bronze eyes burned as he watched them.

And then the last spell came off, and Evan stepped forward, bent his head, adjusted his position a bit to get around Indigena's vines, and ripped Sylvan's throat out.

The pleading ended in a sudden spray of blood. Some of it coated her darlings, and Indigena wrinkled her nose at the feel of the liquid, which was nothing like as nourishing as water. She swiped at her face, even though none of the blood was on her skin, and caught one glimpse of Evan, laughing, red-mouthed, eyes dark as blueberries, before she let the vines go and turned away.

Her plants followed her. She would go down into the dungeons of Hogwarts, to be with her horn hammer, and be standing there, innocent as always, when her Lord came looking for her. Indigena wanted nothing more to do with either Evan or Henrietta Bulstrode.

Harry saw his brother from the corner of his eye. He saw the diving Kanerva from the corner of his other eye, and the bird swooping out of her way. He saw, mainly, the shade of Tom Riddle suddenly darting away from him, towards Connor, as if it knew how much easier possessing his brother would be.

The shade shot over to him, and then came to a stop. Searing white light shone from Connor's body, staring in the middle of his heart-shaped scar and spreading outward. It appeared to aim itself in an arrowpoint straight at the shard of Voldemort's soul, which covered back with its hand over its face.

Harry didn't know what had stopped it this time—maybe just his intense love for his brother—and he wasn't about to care. He snapped his hand out, and made a final effort, this time sustained by all his conscious love for Connor, to draw the soul into him and destroy it.

It stuck in his throat and hurt horribly going down, but he did it. Harry felt the final threads of magic supporting the shard of the soul tear apart. He heard Voldemort's frustrated shriek from across the room, and saw Connor lower his hand, blinking, examining his own skin cautiously, as if he couldn't believe that he had managed to defeat something like a piece of Voldemort. Then his eyes came back to Harry's, and there was understanding and gratitude in them.

And then two other people pressed around Connor and into the room. One was Luna, her eyes wide as she gazed at the Headmistress's body and the drained Sword on the floor. Harry wasn't sure that she saw McGonagall at all, next to the blade.

"It's gone," she whispered. "I knew that it would be, but I wanted to see it for myself."

The second figure was Michael Rosier-Henlin. He didn't hesitate, stop, or look around. He threw himself past Harry, and straight at Voldemort, shouting something half-strangled. Harry could make out only Medusa's name, and Eos's.

Voldemort slapped past Kanerva with two reaching tendrils of power. The first one had to go sideways, to reach Michael, and missed its mark, Harry thought. It caught him a slap across the face and tumbled him sideways, smashing his head into the desk and knocking him unconscious. He would probably have a burn on his cheek, a nasty one, but he still breathed.

The second tendril went past Harry, and he ducked instinctively, and then he was looking at Michael. Then he turned, and saw what it had done.

Luna lay against the open door, her neck broken, her eyes wide and staring.

Harry tried to speak, to think, to do something. But he could not. Luna's death was not something he had ever thought to be *asked* to act on or comprehend.

A wind began to boil in the room, and Kanerva's voice whispered, "Dark Lord. Shall we dance?"

Voldemort snarled in rage, and Harry knew they could not stay. Kanerva was stronger than he was, and she appeared to be fully committed to the battle with Voldemort, given that *she* had attacked *him*. The wild Dark must not have held her interest sufficiently.

Harry was still not strong enough to face Voldemort, even with all the magic he had swallowed, and he knew the man could not be killed without destroying the other two Horcruxes, and he had the living to care for.

He sent his own magic out in two tendrils, one to pick up the unconscious Michael, one to snatch Connor, and then he was out of the room and bounding down the moving staircase. Connor, floating behind him, protested vociferously over not being allowed to walk.

The sight of dead and staring eyes pursued Harry all the way.

He was furious.

He had never been furious before. He understood that now. Those little rages had all been practices for the real thing, and this was the real thing, this black ice that slaked his veins with a surplus of fury and then broke over him like a red sun.

And the Dark Lady in front of him dared to taunt him, dared to hinder him from going after his enemy.

A moment later, though, the Lord Voldemort gained control of himself. He had come here to retrieve his Horcrux, to taunt Harry, and to drain magic. The first goal was impossible now, the second he had succeeded in, and he could still accomplish the last.

And he would tear Hogwarts stone from stone while he was at it, to make a fitting cairn for the shard of his soul that had perished here.

He grabbed the Dark Lady.

She was wild. She was mad. She had given herself over to the wild Dark on the condition that it would destroy her. It was the kind of thinking that in other circumstances, had he not been so much Death's enemy, the Lord Voldemort would have admired.

But she was no match for him, the most powerful wizard who had ever lived, and with the ability to drain her of her magic. He drank her, and her winds grew slower and slower, and her body came back into sight, and then he took her head in his hands and *twisted*.

And still he could not be rid of it, that high jackal's laughter in his ears.

Harry was not sure how they had reached the outside of the school. He remembered Apparating, and then he remembered going back because Connor had explained that some Gryffindors and Ravenclaws were still making their way out of the school, and he had caught a glimpse of Snape in there, and he had seen Jing-Xi, and he had helped to stabilize falling stones and crumpling steel, and then he had felt Voldemort's magic falling on them like a block itself and knew they dared stay no longer.

They stood now near the far opening of the tunnel that lay under the school, helping spilling students out of the hole: Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs guided by Helga's spirit, Draco and the Slytherins. Draco took his hand in a grip that still stung and hurt now, five minutes later. Harry could hear Connor's voice speaking to Padma, and the beginning of her tears, and he could see wounds scattered on bodies everywhere, and dust.

And not everyone who had stayed at the school over the winter holidays had come out again.

Harry raised his head. He could see the black flag of Voldemort's power rising to the south and east. He knew that, in his frustration, the Dark Lord would probably take the school apart. He knew that Kanerva was dead, and anyone who remained there. He wanted to collapse, and he wanted to grieve.

But, first, he had to make sure he got the children with him to safety, in case Voldemort finished his tantrum sooner than Harry thought he would and came after them.

He turned away.

There was a snarl, and the wild Dark came down on him.

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Chapter Fifty-Four: The Beast in the Wilderness

Harry saw the mantichore swoop towards him, its darkness beating around it like wings, its mouth wide open. It might suck his soul out of his body, for all he knew, like a Dementor. He did know that it wanted him, and if he stood there and gave in, out of weariness or fear or simple and sheer disgust with everything that had happened, it would have him.

So he remembered the plan he'd crafted for dealing with the wild Dark—he'd made it up a hundred years ago—and lifted his voice.

The darkness around him splintered at the sound of the phoenix song. The mantichore stopped moving, and stood still, just as it had hovered in front of him on those nights when Harry sang from the top of the Astronomy Tower.

The Astronomy Tower that was now so much shattered rubble among the remains of the castle—

Harry shoved the thought impatiently away. *Oh, yes, mourning for the castle will help me now. Except that it will not, and I must learn to distinguish between what will and what won't.*

He warbled, feathering and softening his voice, and let the blue flame race up and down his arms. It was hardly difficult, in the wake of everything he felt over the collapse of Hogwarts. He might dwell in righteous anger for the rest of his life and never have enough of it.

The mantichore dropped to the ground and began to pace around him, eyes wide and intent and very green. Harry watched the scorpion tail sway above its back, and could guess what would happen to someone who got too close, the way that Draco seemed intent on doing now.

On the other hand, he didn't have the breath to spare from the song to shout a warning. So he trusted to Draco's good sense, just as he had to keep him inside the castle and away from the battle, and moved backward, step by step, listening to his feet crunching on the snow, the intense, hearing silence around him, and the cadence and lift and dash of his voice.

The wild Dark followed. It had started an almost imperceptible purring. Harry could feel the sound vibrating in his bones better than he could hear it. The scorpion tail still danced back and forth, and the wide eyes now seemed drugged. Harry knew the wild Dark would react fast enough if he stopped singing, though.

He dropped to one knee, briefly, as though searching for something in the snow. Then he stood and waved his arms about, timing the gestures to the song. The mantichore followed the motions with its eyes, and a whine arrived to add to the purr. It didn't understand him, and it wanted to understand, Harry knew. He belonged to it, as far as it was concerned. It would want all his secrets, his ways of thinking about things, his powers, his spirit.

Harry knew Voldemort had managed to charm it with a soul-pattern, which he didn't have time to draw. He would just have to entice it with something else.

And above all else, the wild Dark desired the Light. Harry's arms imitated the motions of phoenix wings.

He felt the moment the mantichore realized that. The purr escaped its lips this time, and it padded forward again, lion paws large and light, dangerous gaze never wavering from him.

Step by step, Harry led it back towards the Forbidden Forest, away from the people gathered on the hole outside the tunnel from Hogwarts, and he hoped to Merlin that they would have the good sense to get away while he bought them time.

As he rose above the rubble that had been the home of his enemies, the Lord Voldemort noted that he rose into silence.

It was—strange. He had expected noise, his magic imploding on itself, his own furious cries, and the sound of the roused storm as the wild Dark fed on Harry's soul. But what he got was the eye of the storm. The Lord Voldemort stopped rising and hovered, borne on a current of magic as birds flew on wind. He had the time to pause and figure out what had happened. It was not as though Harry and his fellow children could flee far or fast.

The silence coalesced into a ripple in front of him, rotating like the edge of a hurricane, and then the wild Dark was there. The Lord Voldemort would have known that power anywhere, though it currently did not have the manticores form it usually bore this year. It had the form of a white snake, a dragon without legs, wreathed back on itself and watching him with cold blue eyes.

The Lord Voldemort could only imagine that it had come to make common cause with him in hunting Harry, which was not that surprising. He had promised himself his heir's magic, but the wild Dark would have the soul. He nodded, and extended his arm and his magic, which trailed it like a heavy sleeve, to point beyond Hogwarts.

"Their trail begins there," he said. He spoke aloud, but the wild Dark would hear the intentions and the connotations behind his words, which were the most important parts.

The snake turned towards him and showed its fangs. The Lord Voldemort faltered, his eyes narrowing. *Something is wrong.*

The serpent spoke in Parseltongue, and its voice shook his spine. *"I made a promise to one of my servants. I did not keep that promise. You killed her, and that is not the death she chose. For killing her, you shall pay."*

Harry had pulled the wild Dark into the edge of the Forbidden Forest, so that the trees whispered and creaked around them, the bare black branches scraping the back of his neck when he stood up from his half-crouched position. His arms ached, and he knew he couldn't flap them much longer. He still held the manticores eyes, and he still sang, but now he had to try a new tactic.

He stooped down, therefore, and sat in the snow. The blue flame that shone around him sparked and began to melt it. But the drops of running water smelled sweet, like myrrh, and the water itself made Harry feel as if he stood in a shower in the loo off his and Draco's bedroom.

As you never will again.

Harry told his mind to shut up. It was inconvenient, truly, the way it insisted on making him think in a human fashion even when he was trying to do other things. He leaned his head on his right hand and flexed the fingers, enjoying the way they bent now with the last of the Horcrux taint gone. He turned his thoughts to water and floated the physical sensations in it like the ingredients of a soup, making sure the wild Dark could see how good it felt to sing the phoenix song and how much more aware he was while the music and the fire flooded his body.

The manticore crept a few steps nearer still. Now the lion's chest loomed over him, with the scorpion tail lashing and rippling just behind it, and the great human face stared and stared.

Harry smiled at it, and the manticore gave a little stamp of its left hind paw. Harry knew it was from delight.

The wild Dark knew what he had suffered with the fall of Hogwarts. If it could read his emotions, then it could sense grief and guilt, and it had been a large part of causing that grief and guilt. But Harry could still smile at it, and he could still lie about in front of the wild Dark and sing this way. The wild Dark wanted a soul so resilient and stubborn for itself.

Harry let more thoughts flow into his mind. Ordinarily, he could not have done this. It was the phoenix song which made him able to bear the bleaker emotions for now. The Light in him, that shard of pure Light he had not asked for from Fawkes's death but which had come to him in any case and which it would be stupid not to use, carried him through the Midwinters of his life.

The manticore came close enough that Harry could feel the warmth of the drool dripping from its jaws. Its breath smelled like

wormy meat, soft with heat and corruption.

Harry tilted his head back encouragingly. He lay completely supine in the snow in front of the manticores now. To a stranger, he might look submissive, offering his throat to be torn by those mighty jaws.

He had another plan in mind, and as long as no one interfered, tried to rescue him or be a hero, then he thought he would succeed.

The snake curled around him. The Lord Voldemort held still, and hovered on his current of magic, because he could not believe that this had happened to him. He and the wild Dark were partners in the destruction of Harry. He was to have the magic, and the wild Dark was to have the soul. It had never shown any sign of being less than fascinated once he began to create the pattern of flesh and blood. Should it not be a distance away, taking the soul from Harry's body and leaving the corpse for the Lord Voldemort to reclaim and his friends for him to torture?

But the white serpent wound about him, and then fastened its cold blue fangs in his neck, and the Lord Voldemort came to understand something he had forgotten: the wild Dark did not answer to human standards. It might be miles away reaping Harry just as it floated here with him. And it might agree to a bargain it would hold until Midwinter night and then break its own rules.

He had understood that. He had been sure he understood that.

And then he realized that he had fallen into the common, petty human trap of assuming superior comprehension when, in truth, he had tricked himself into shutting and locking the cage door behind him.

He cried out, but the wild Dark did not care. He struck with his newly-powerful magic, but the wild Dark did not notice. He called for his Death Eaters, for Indigena, burning his power through the Dark Mark, and the jackal laughter of Death entered his ears.

The Lord Voldemort made himself be still. He knew the wild Dark could not kill him. The laws of Horcruxes were absolute. The Unassailable Curses he had laid demanded willing sacrifices, and the wild Dark did not make sacrifices, it took them. He was safe. It might badly damage him, but he would survive, and survival was his ultimate goal.

I have you, the wild Dark whispered, and then they rolled, and the grip of the night around him was tight and silent, and the Lord Voldemort learned again what it was like to be small before a stronger force.

Harry watched the maw of the manticore descend nearer and nearer his face, and sang with all his might.

Fawkes had sung like this last year, when he danced among the clouds of the Midwinter night and yielded his life. He had given visions to Harry as he died, visions of sunlight and moonlight and starlight that graced creatures who were *meant* to live in them. And he had given Harry his voice as if he had planned the gift all along, though Harry doubted it was so.

The gift had come to him, lightly, and Harry had used it as lightly as he could. He could offer hope, but he would not compel with it, nor change minds. Relieve despair, remind people of his existence and the existence of others, but not use it to stir the world like a glass rod in a potion.

Given that, how lightly it had come to him, how should he cling to it, how become jealous and possessive of it? Fawkes had been anything but jealous and possessive. His occasional sparring with Hedwig and Argutus had come more from shared physical space than jealousy.

The thoughts raced through Harry's head, faster and faster, as the teeth halted a few inches above his face. His bones vibrated with the force of his voice and the manticore's purr. He put up a hand, greatly daring, and felt the smooth, short fur under his palm. The wild Dark slowly tilted its head, poison-green eyes telling him not to grow too comfortable with this.

Harry would not call his state of mind *comfortable*. He hung between extremes, and all around him exultation and despair, Dark and Light, raced like comets. He knew he might die in a moment, but, with the part of him that welcomed death for comfort and for his crimes, he felt more excited about the prospect than anything else. The air between him and the wild Dark pulsed with familiarity.

Few wizards and witches attained this power. Those who did, Declared, and after that they were close to one or the other, Dark or Light, but never both again. Harry had ridden the Light when it went to take back stolen magic from Voldemort, and now he lay

on his back beneath the teeth of a beast that could rip his throat out and felt exactly the same wonder and awe he had felt then.

The wild Dark turned its head further to the side and laid its cheek along his. A shock of warmth traveled into Harry, and from it the wild Dark's intense pleasure and appreciation. It *wanted* him, all the more for the strange thoughts flowing through his mind. If it wanted someone who thought ordinary things, it could have found such a person and stolen his soul at any time. But this was different. Its purring said so. The heavy paw it lifted and laid across Harry's chest, the claws that could disembowel him poking lightly at his skin, said so.

Harry knew, somewhere in the depths of his brain, that his plan had turned somewhat wrong. He had intended to touch the wild Dark's inherent fascination with the Light, and make it focus on his phoenix voice. Instead, it seemed he had increased its fascination with his soul.

But in that moment, as he stared into eyes so large that he could only focus on one of them at a time when they were this close, he found that he didn't care.

The Lord Voldemort saw curves of darkness surrounding a globe so small that it seemed lost in all that immensity. He could reach out and crush it in his hand. And he did try, but the white serpent kept his hand bound to his side.

"You are unchangeable."

The Lord Voldemort did not understand that. He did not understand what he had been brought here to see. Though the realization of smallness had impacted him greatly at first, like the destruction of a Horcrux, it had faded. The wild Dark could not bring back the dead, and it had made no movement to take the Dark Lady's magic from him. Therefore, it would do something chaotic and wild to suit its nature, and then it would release him, and he could begin the hunt for Harry and the children and traitors who had accompanied him.

A cold sigh traveled past his ear, and then the darkness parted, opening like a series of shrouds releasing their victims, wing after wing whispering away. The Lord Voldemort could see the earth floating now in the unclouded light of stars and suns, sparking a few random gleams from its seas or high mountains covered with snow. His longing to reach out and crush it in one hand increased. If only he could do so, if only he did not have to spend so much of his time battling prophecies and his heir and those other things that did not know their rightful Lord and their rightful place.

"So small is the earth," the white serpent hissed into his ear. *"And so mighty am I that I dwarf it, and so does the Light. When I make a promise to a follower, then I always keep that promise."*

The Lord Voldemort said nothing. He felt, in fact, a boredom much like the emotion he had felt when a child in Hogwarts or the orphanage, when adults scolded him with tears in their eyes or frowns on their faces. They wanted him to act like a good boy, like a good child, to stop behaving as if he did not know the difference between right and wrong. They had never listened to his ambitions, never realized that he had the right to power and wisdom beyond his years by virtue of that power. The wild Dark would scold him, as they had, and that would be the end of it.

There was a long pause. The wild Dark had sensed his thoughts. The Lord Voldemort hoped to be set back on his feet. This was only another one of the many repeated episodes that had once characterized his life. He was eager to be on to something new, to kill the only one who could kill him, according to the prophecy and their connection, and then to smell the rest of the world's fear. He could not imagine how mighty he would be when he had absorbed Harry's magic back into himself and no longer had a constant drain on his power. Would the Lords and Ladies of the Pact cower before him, or would they put up a pathetic fight before he crushed them and extended his shadow over the wizards and the Muggle world alike? How long would the purges of Mudbloods take? How many generations until everyone could chant the genealogy of Slytherin's heir, and treated the name of Harry Potter, Harry Black, the *vates*, as a traitor's too horrible to think on?

And then the wild Dark said, *"By the patterns of Light and Dark, my great kin and I exert our influence on the world at destined times. And I say now that you, who call yourself my servant, shall not again use your power in open battle until the spring equinox and the coming of the Light."*

The first drop of drool splashed into Harry's eyes. He blinked. He hadn't realized the moment his view changed from that of large green eyes to fang. He reached up and ran his right hand along the edge of the nearest tooth. It nearly removed his last two fingers. In a distant, drowsy way, he approved.

Also, in a distant, drowsy way, he realized that his throat hurt from singing the phoenix song, but he didn't think he had much choice but to continue. He sat up a little more and shook his head, still ducking beneath the manticores' chin, and turned the current of the music. In the back of his mind thrummed the thought that his and the wild Dark's mutual fascination had lasted long enough, and now he needed to get on with things.

He sang of the way that his voice had attracted the attention of Acies in her dragon form, and tried to put the flight of Dark creatures into the voice of a creature of the Light. He wasn't sure he succeeded, but the wild Dark whuffed an appreciation of his efforts and moved closer. It was nearly part of him now, standing in his shadow, his boundaries and its flowing and mingling. Harry could feel abysses too great for him to endure hovering just beyond his sight or comprehension. He leaned closer to them. Why not? He had succeeded in passing beyond the moment when he might have rejected the wild Dark and turned on it because of what it had done to his home. Now, he needed to feel that he stood above a drop in order to make him keep his mind on the task. The wild Dark simply didn't seem as awful as it had.

It could offer him that oblivion he had dreamed of, the perfect black nothingness and rest he had once thought he would attain with suicide.

The wild Dark took a step closer, purring once more.

It could make the world around him so simple. With him dead, his soul utterly absorbed, he wouldn't care about anything any more, not have to deal with decisions and difficulties and whether he had done something wrong according to his standards or others'.

The wild Dark's breath came from his own mouth, its madness and its thoughts passed behind his own eyes.

And that was the promise, or part of the promise, it had made to Kanerva, and it had ended up not granting her that promise.

The wild Dark flinched back with a sharp cry, and they hung between extremes in a moment when it might have shredded Harry apart for reminding it of its failures.

Harry filled his voice with the challenge, the challenge that the Light always offered to the Dark, and waited.

The Lord Voldemort felt boredom travel through him and then ebb like a cold wave. That left what the wild Dark had said. He could not use his power until the spring equinox, while darkness dominated the world.

He simply rejected the notion, impatient and incredulous at the thought of any such holds on his power. He was the strongest wizard in the world! The Lords and Ladies of the Pact themselves could not stand against him! Muggle weapons would fall apart if he so much as looked at them! And the Dark thought it could restrict what he tried to do? It was nonsense.

The Dark sighed as if to itself, and the white serpent hissed through the place in his shoulder where the icicle fangs still gripped. *"Why must I be so badly served?"* it asked in Parseltongue. *"Why must those Lords who have arisen in Britain give not their whole hearts to me, as they do in other countries, but attempt to hold back, cheat, and pay more attention to mortal politics than to me?"*

The Lord Voldemort did not know what it meant. What *he* meant was that he would continue to use his power up until the spring equinox, not simply past it.

The Dark's voice had gone amused, now; the Lord Voldemort would have recognized that particular twist of the hiss in Parseltongue anywhere, since he had often used the language to laugh at his enemies. *"It is not your choice. When you made the Declaration to me, when you promised not to serve the Light or use Light spells without some measure of subterfuge involved, you gave me power over you. I have not chosen to exert that power. I have liked watching your wildness. What harm you brought to others was aimed at Light wizards, and when I am rational, I admire it. When I am angry at you, I seek to stretch the wildness further."*

"But now you have killed another servant of mine, who was also wild, and with whom I was not yet finished. I can and I will restrict your power. Until the Light returns to save you, you will not use your power against Harry directly. Magic sustains you, but you cannot use it in battle." The wild Dark paused as if in contemplation. *"And you cannot drain."*

And then the image of the earth faded, and the white serpent, and the cold poison in his veins, and the Lord Voldemort stood

among the rubble of the castle with the hour of greatest darkness passed. He at once gathered his magic to spring into the air as if he had wings and fly after Harry.

Nothing happened.

He conjured an intricate, glowing sphere on his palm, and it appeared. He channeled power to the new eyes he had created, and they responded, sharpening and brightening his vision. He reached out to drain the magic of the artifacts lingering in the bowels of the castle, and nothing happened.

It took him long moments to connect his own powerlessness with what the wild Dark had said about the magic it would hold back from him.

A frustrated scream rose from his throat and ripped through the night.

Harry knelt there, singing, his eyes shut, his blue fire melting the snow around him, and listened to the wild Dark pace and mutter, pace and snarl under its breath, pace and think.

It leaned close to his ear and snarled straight at him at one point.

Harry ignored it as serenely as he could. He had done what he wanted—he hoped. He had turned the wild Dark’s attention away from his soul by showing it he would not make an ideal possession after all. His soul resembled Kanerva’s soul, but the wild Dark had not kept its promise to her. How could Harry trust it to keep its promises to him, any promise that it might make? He would not Declare, he would not yield gracefully, because he would not get enough out of doing so.

So he sang the song of Light, and listened to the wild Dark try to find some way to refute his dilemma. Or he waited for the moment when it would decide that its rules could bind it no longer and change its mind.

Whatever comes first.

At last, the manticores’ pacing slowed, and Harry opened his eyes to see it standing in front of him, scorpion tail slung jauntily over its back. It could not oppose what he had thought. No, it had not served Kanerva well. And while it could punish Voldemort, that would not turn time around or bring her back to life, which were the only second chances it could have had. But it still wished Harry would reconsider. He had fascinated it. It wanted something from him.

Harry cocked his eyebrow. He had sensed the words as if someone were speaking to him in a conversation, but they did not come to him in words; they simply awakened in his head and were there as if he had known them all before he developed his first conscious thought, rather like the colors he saw.

He knew he should not draw this out much longer. The wild Dark could lose interest at any moment, or decide to break its rules, or rule that its punishment of Voldemort was enough to pay for Kanerva’s death and take his soul anyway. The wild Dark kept its bargains unless it had a better idea. Harry didn’t want to give it the moments to have that better idea.

He cocked his head to the side and let his song whisper into silence. The blue fire faded, and Harry became aware that he was, in fact, shivering rather violently and that his throat hurt as if he had swallowed snow and run a mile in cold air. The wild Dark gave a low whine of distress.

Harry touched his throat and raised his eyebrows. He could not speak, but the wild Dark would read his meaning well enough.

The manticores whined again, and then came nearer, paws so light on the snow that its claws didn’t seem to disturb a particle from its place. Its major emotion now was wonder, Harry thought. He would give it the phoenix voice? It could really take that song from him, and he wouldn’t miss it?

Well, of course Harry would *miss* it. But it made a better fit for the wild Dark than his soul did, and as it had said, it was not letting him go without some kind of a sacrifice from him, a gift.

He locked his eyes with the calm green ones and waited.

The manticores bowed its head and licked its tongue over his throat. Harry felt the phoenix song scraped out of him, like remnants of cheese removed from a grater, and bowed his head. No, he had not wanted to lose the last gift Fawkes had ever given him, but

far better than his life or his soul and all the lives within Hogwarts.

Now, of course, it remained to be seen whether the wild Dark would take that and go away, or whether it would change its mind and snatch his soul after all. Harry had struggled so hard, had thrown so much of his will into the song, that he found himself peaceful and drained and not caring what happened. Either way, he had fought the best fight he knew how.

The wild Dark's scorpion sting slid over his cheek. Harry opened his eyes to see the manticores staring at him.

They had shared something wonderful and endless a few moments ago, and the wild Dark would not forget that.

It turned away from him and sprang upward, becoming part of the night again. A moment later, Harry felt the storm, the same power that had helped to destroy Hogwarts and its wards, begin to pass away. To the north, too, the sky was clear. Harry didn't think Voldemort would come after them this night.

He climbed to his feet and walked back through the trees towards Draco and Snape and Connor and the others. He did not think of the fact that he had bargained with the monster who had helped to kill so many, or of the work that awaited him when he rejoined them, work only he could do. He thought of nothing at all.

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Chapter Fifty-Five: The Concussive Dance

Snape exhaled in relief when he saw Harry coming back to them from the edge of the Forest. He would have moved the students who stood around the tunnel to one of the safehouses—preferably one of the Black houses—sooner or later, but Harry's presence was the only magic that might be able to protect them from the wild Dark and Voldemort on the way.

Although, if the scream and the clearing sky from the north were any indication, the Dark Lord would not be coming after them for some time.

Snape shook his head. He was not used to feeling such a heavy weight of responsibility. He would bear it for Harry, but knowing that Minerva had died and left him Headmaster of the school, responsible for these children's safety—

What was she thinking? There will be many parents who won't trust me with the safety of their children. She should have chosen Peter, Pomona, Filius, anyone but me. Snape closed one hand into a fist. I don't know how to do this. And I'm depending on my adopted son to lead us. Surely that's the most pathetic sign of all.

Harry came to a halt in front of him, and Snape found that his voice had stuck in his throat. They hadn't seen much of what happened in the clearing in the woods; Harry's phoenix voice and the power of the wild Dark had woven a mingled barrier of night and flame to keep them back. But Harry's eyes were dead, not merely blank but empty, and he touched his throat and shook his head when Snape looked at him expectantly. Apparently, he'd sung out the phoenix voice and, with it, the voice that would let him talk.

Letters of fire sprouted from his fingers to hang in the air and make up for that a moment later, though. They didn't waver even as Draco moved forward and hugged Harry firmly enough to almost knock him off his feet. Harry just shifted to one side as if to compensate for the hug, and more letters spilled out of him to join the first line.

We should bring the children to Silver-Mirror. That will be our new central headquarters. The wild Dark no longer wants my soul, and won't pursue us. And Voldemort screamed as if something had stopped him. I don't know what it was. Perhaps wounds taken in the battle with Kanerva. Either way, we must move, and Silver-Mirror is the destination that makes sense, the one with the strongest wards and the one that will serve as a good central location to gather the others around us.

Snape nodded unwillingly. Silver-Mirror was at least closer to most of their allies' homes than the far-flung Copley-by-the-Sea, and though they could have gone to Grimmauld Place, trying to herd a group of tired and crying children through Muggle London was not a challenge Snape would have looked forward to. "And what shall we do once we arrive at Silver-Mirror?"

Harry grunted and shifted to the side again as Draco's embrace grew firmer. It seemed that Draco wanted him to look at him, but Harry refused, keeping his eyes steadily on Snape. *For the night? Bed down the children. Heal the wounded. In the morning, try to figure out who survived, and send messengers to contact the parents and explain the situation. Start rebuilding a government from the ashes of the Ministry and the ruins of Hogwarts.*

Snape frowned slightly. He had the feeling that something was wrong. He caught Harry's eye, but could see no sign of

Occlumency suppression there. Harry simply appeared calm and thoughtful, putting aside his emotions for the greater good of the people he had to save. Snape told himself not to worry so much. Harry had always been good at doing what had to be done.

Later, if necessary, he would talk to his son and find out whether he blamed himself for the dead of Hogwarts. For now, they both had to deal with the living of Hogwarts.

He turned away and studied the circle of tear-streaked faces that lifted to look at him. “We will be Apparating to a house where you will be safe,” he said loudly. “Those who can Apparate, please hold the hands of those who cannot, and begin transporting them.” He nodded to Regulus. “Go before them and lower the wards—“

“Of course,” Regulus murmured, and vanished.

I’ll stay here to guard them, if you want to go ahead, Harry signed.

Snape nodded, but said, “I can’t go ahead. Not yet.” He turned his head back towards the school. “If there are others there, children who need my help or might be lying trapped in the ruins—“

Harry’s eyes turned bleak, and he nodded in turn. But he extended a cocoon of protection over the children around him instead of accompanying Snape to the school. Perhaps he understood that Snape would call for him if he needed his magic, to shift stones or heal someone who would die without his help.

Perhaps he simply knew his own limits, and knew that, while Snape needed to look at the shattered wreckage of the building that had been his home for decades, Harry himself could not yet bear it.

Snape closed his eyes and pictured the end of the Hogsmeade road. He’d appeared there before he realized he could have Apparated closer to the school. The wards that prevented Apparition were gone, after all.

No sense in protecting a ruin.

He walked forward, staring. The school had fallen in upon itself, with stone folding on stone, and the Towers curling inward like the petals of a flower touched by frost. Snape tried to make out what had been the roof of the Great Hall, what had been the entrance doors, where the Headmistress’s office would have been. Nothing, and nothing, and nothing. The school looked like what it was, rubble, already touched with a light drifting of snow.

Snape closed his eyes.

He wanted to rage. Minerva had made the wrong choice. She’d done what she could to insure the children would be safe after her death, yes, but she could never have anticipated something like this. He was the wrong man to do this.

But she had consigned authority to him, and that meant he would have to bear it. And if Harry could do it, he could.

Still—

The nearest thing he’d had to a home in his childhood, and the building he’d worked in and loved and hated for so long as an adult. Gone.

Snape forced himself to open his eyes, to see what was there instead of the memories that wanted to intrude, and walked closer to the pile in the dark and the cold, absently casting Warming Charms on himself as he moved. He needed to search for survivors.

As if anyone could have survived that—

But someone might have.

Henrietta found her way to Silver-Mirror after a few false starts, having checked Grimmauld Place and then Copley-by-the-Sea first. It made sense that Harry would have chosen one of the Black houses as his new stronghold. It was his name now, after all, and the wards recognized and responded only to him and Regulus. And Silver-Mirror did have formidable weapons should an enemy come. Henrietta approved.

Regulus recognized her touch on the wards and let her in. Henrietta smiled at him, and then said, “What do you need help with?”

The Black studied her for a moment. Henrietta studied him calmly back. She knew Regulus had never trusted her, since he'd been there when she made her first, rather unfortunate, attempts to take power from Harry, but he had to know that she would be a familiar face to many of the students, as their Transfiguration Professor. And, a moment later, he nodded and gestured her to one of the side rooms, which looked like a library.

"There are some children we can't get to calm down in there," he said. "Could you tend to them?"

"Of course," Henrietta murmured, and glided away, into the room full of terrified second-years. She'd repaired her glamour the moment she parted from Evan, and now she looked like Professor Belluspersona again, a hard teacher, but known for being calm and kind outside the classroom.

A little girl in a Ravenclaw crest recognized her first, and broke and ran to her, sobbing. She babbled out some tale of watching a friend die in the fall of stones. Henrietta knelt down, put an arm around her, and stroked her hair. Such gestures had never been natural to her, but she had learned them as part of the dance she was to play in Harry's entourage. Besides, she had abused only her own daughter in the quest for power. These children were reflections of Harry to her. If Harry cared about their lives and did not want them hurt, then she would protect them.

The rest of the children surrounded her, crying and uttering pleas for reassurance and asking what had happened. Henrietta began to cast a great many surreptitious Cleaning Charms and dry a great many tears. She knew she would have a long night ahead of her. She didn't mind. Such service had become natural to her since she swore the Unbreakable Vows. The good of Harry and his cause was more important to her even than her own allegiance to the Dark.

The Ravenclaw second-year who stood closest to her blinked and looked up, touching her face in wonder. "Did a stone hurt you, Professor?" she whispered.

"I can't really remember," said Henrietta, licking the blood from her lips. These children were not to know the truth. They knew nothing of falling on Evan Rosier in the snow, and kissing him hard enough to make him bite his lower lip, and looking into his dark eyes, and seeing, at the bottom of all the madness and the laughter, the terror. He still remembered the pain of his violation. Henrietta was the only one who could make him fear like that.

But those were not tales for children.

"I think a rock hit you," the second-year whispered.

Henrietta kissed her hair, and looked calmly at the smear of red on the blonde curls. "Maybe it did," she said.

Monika stepped back from the pool with a thoughtful look on her face.

Well. Wasn't *that* interesting.

She hadn't thought Lord Riddle would bring down Hogwarts, she had to admit, at least not without more of a fight from Harry. She had thought he had some attachment to the place, enough to want to dominate it. He'd take it for a headquarters, a stronghold, but not actually tumble it onto the heads of the inhabitants. It seemed she'd been wrong.

It was a pity that this was probably only a fluke and not the sign of something truly interesting about Lord Riddle that she'd missed all along, though. Monika didn't think she could be that lucky. Several of the other Dark Lords and Ladies in the world were boring. Lord Riddle was firmly in their ranks, unexpected behavior notwithstanding.

She had watched the wild Dark chastise him with great enjoyment. She knew the wild Dark had allowed her to see, and its amusement had fed back into hers. She and the wild Dark enjoyed a comradely relationship, most of the time. That was partly because Monika kept her own limits always in mind. She would never be so foolish as to challenge the Dark. If it required a gesture of submission from her, then she would be sure to make it.

But Kanerva was dead.

And Jing-Xi would probably insist on remaining in Britain to help Harry and the survivors patch up their wounds, and she might even break the Pact's rules in doing so, in order to carry the battle to Lord Riddle.

The Pact would shake.

Monika cocked her head, trying to decide if they would countenance interference in Britain. In the end, though, she had to shake her head. She doubted it. They didn't interfere when Muggles made a mess of things and caused even bigger slaughters in countries belonging to Lords and Ladies.

Besides, there were simply too many conflicting personalities in the Pact. It was asking much of people who shared nothing in common but power to work together. They would argue, they would discuss, they would debate, but in the end, that was all they would do.

Monika nodded. *The fall of Hogwarts is unlikely to make much difference to my plans.*

“Greetings, Seaborn.”

Pamela opened her eyes with a yelp, and then glared. A window hovered in front of her, the kind that Lords and Ladies usually used to speak to one another over long distances. Alexandre's face floated in it. By his expression, he knew, and did not care, that he had woken her from a sound sleep.

“Dark Lord, what—“ she began, rubbing at her eyes.

“Hogwarts has fallen,” said Alexandre, his voice toneless. “And the man who calls himself the sole Dark Lord of the world has swallowed the Lady Kanerva's power.”

Pamela froze, her blood tingling. Then she said quietly, “He will be unstoppable, if that is the case.”

Alexandre shrugged. As usual, he had the silvery curl of an unfulfilled prophecy around him. He stroked the edge of it like a child playing with a napkin for the lack of any other toys. “Perhaps not. The Dark also punished him, and bound him from doing any harm for the period of a few months, until the Light returns to dominate the Northern Hemisphere. Such as using the *absorbere* gift, for example.” He looked up and caught Pamela's eyes. “That might convince the Pact that they should wait to interfere.”

And by the tone of his voice, Pamela knew what he thought would happen. The Pact would argue and debate and dicker among themselves, and they would point out that they had the space of some months to do so, and in the end, nothing would get done. Their tempers and the dreams of personal advantage and the old non-interference laws would, in the end, hold them back from helping Harry.

“That can't happen, Alexandre,” Pamela said flatly, standing. “I'm going to call on Coatlicue. I need help to convince them that this time, we *have* to move. Harry's not the only Lord-slayer in the world any more, and we know that Lord Riddle won't have done it in self-defense.” She started to turn away. Coatlicue might be sleeping as well, or involved in a delicate magical procedure, but that didn't matter. Pamela would drag her out of either one.

“I will help you.”

Pamela turned and stared at him, then shook her head. She didn't understand the odd truce they seemed to have come to at all. “Why, Alexandre? We serve different allegiances, and I know that you don't have a prophecy that tells you the proper way to defeat Voldemort, or you would have mentioned it by now.”

He gave her one of those unfathomable smiles. “Many prophecies that speak of how to defeat Riddle are flying around Britain right now. Call it—helping my research to help you.”

If he can throw his voice behind mine and Coatlicue's, our arguments will carry greater weight. And they might join Jing-Xi, too, if she had survived the fall of Hogwarts, though Pamela was sure Alexandre would have told her if Voldemort had drained her friend.

But she wasn't sure that she could trust Alexandre to continue taking their side, which was the whole problem.

They needed him, however, and it would help if the Dark Lords and Ladies didn't see this as just another effort by the Light to meddle and overstep their bounds even during the time of year when the Dark was most powerful in the north. In the end, Pamela nodded and drew a connection from Alexandre's window across time and space to Mexico, where they would wake Coatlicue. “Come with me, then.”

Jing-Xi knew there were probably people wondering if she had survived. She knew that Harry and others would need her help. There was a government to be rebuilt, wizards of the Light to reassure, and a nervous, shaky Pact to convince that this case warranted interference.

But, first, she had other, immediate responsibilities. Light wizards and witches did not dash about like crop-tailed Crups yapping about what to do in a crisis. And Light Ladies had a certain dignity to maintain, always.

She crouched next to a witch who had escaped Hogwarts just as one of the ceilings came down, pressing a hand against her leg. The wound stopped bleeding, a flow that would have cost the woman her life quickly. The moans quieted, and Jing-Xi stroked her hair and willed peace and sleep into her before stepping back and nodding to one of the wizards who accompanied them.

“Pick her up.”

He moved at once to obey her. Jing-Xi saw the fear in his eyes, and felt a moment’s sadness. They needed a leader so badly, these survivors. They might have fought back and questioned her in any ordinary situation, but now they were simply grateful that there was someone more powerful to help them.

But then again, argument and debate in this situation were not productive. Jing-Xi had found and guided about forty adults from the falling school, along with a few students left behind in the mad rush, and now they were on a wide plain to the north of Hogwarts, heading further north still, into bad weather and a safehouse that Harry had established in the Orkneys. Since none of the people with her had seen the safehouse, and because they did not want to leave each other and Jing-Xi did not want to leave them, they had to go on foot for now, instead of Apparating.

But Jing-Xi had been through worse conditions than this. She turned her face calmly to the next wounded person and knelt down. Her magic surged and sang around her. Even in the middle of the Dark, the Light shone, and Jing-Xi was one of those whose duty was to keep it shining.

Connor was—numb, really.

It hadn’t hit him, while they were escaping the school, that the school itself was going to be gone when they emerged. But now it had, and with it came the visions of those children he couldn’t save, the young Gryffindors and Ravenclaws crushed by the falling rocks.

And old bells of inadequacy rang in the back of his head. *If your magic was stronger, if you were really the Boy-Who-Lived, if you were a real hero, then you would have found a way to spare their lives.*

Connor tried to shake that away, but the emotion, the guilt, possessed and haunted him. He would have liked to stand and move about the room, as Harry was doing, and comfort those who had come to Silver-Mirror with them and badly needed the comfort. He would have liked to be with Parvati, who had her arms around the hysterically crying Padma. He would have liked to indulge even in grief for Luna, who had died so suddenly and so senselessly.

But he couldn’t. He was numb, and he could only sit and stare. He hated to focus solely on himself, but, at the moment, it literally felt as though he couldn’t do anything else.

He closed his eyes, and slumped back in the chair he sat in. Some hero he made. Some Gryffindor he was. What had happened to the reserves of strength he’d always prided himself on? It wasn’t as though his twin brother had died, or his girlfriend. He’d seen most of his friends escape. Peter had even appeared briefly, to squeeze Connor’s shoulder and smile anxiously at him before hurrying off to do something else.

And yet his hands were blocks of ice on the ends of his arms, and he shook now and then as if the ice were moving up his limbs to devour him.

He wondered if Lily and James had been like this, the first time they’d encountered true evil, and then snorted bitterly. *Not likely. Lily was so confident I don’t think she ever let reality dent her sacrificial mindset. And James got along without attending to the darkness in himself at all. No, they’ve never felt like this. And Harry has the strength to keep going. This little weakness is mine, all mine.*

And then arms were around him, warm arms that defeated the ice, and before he could start or jump up and throw the arms off, a familiar voice, hoarse and cracking with strain, murmured in his ear, “Connor. You came through. It’s all right. I heard about what you did in the school. You’re a fucking hero, Connor.”

If anyone but Harry had said that, Connor might have been able to stay numb. But, Merlin damn it, he was thawing.

And tears were spilling down his face, and even though he wanted to be strong and above it all, he found himself turning and grabbing onto Harry with a death grip, returning warm embrace for warm embrace, desperately needing his brother to touch him like that.

“I let them die,” he whispered, through sobs. “I only s-saved two. They—“

“That was two more than you might have saved, if you’d just stood there and let the fall of the roof stun you,” Harry whispered into his ear, and rubbed his back roughly. His voice really did sound horrible, but he went on speaking despite that. “You did so well, Connor. I’m so proud of you. And grieving is hardly something to despise. The ones who would shed no tears over this are the people we’re meant to fight. Go ahead and weep, Connor.”

It felt so *girly* to do this, but Harry’s hand was rubbing, rubbing, forcing the tears up and out of him, melting the ice that had them locked inside it. And Connor cried and cried until his nose was running and his cheeks were wet and the skin of his cheeks hurt from the tears running over them.

Then his head felt warm and full, and sometime between one moment and the next, Parvati was there, to comfort him and be comforted in turn. Connor closed his eyes and clung to her desperately.

They were still alive. And thanks to him, a few more people were alive than would otherwise be. He had to think about that.

Her mother had been wrong.

That was all Ginny could think about, as she bustled through Silver-Mirror, heating warm water for wounds and for tea, holding the hands of those children who needed it, casting strengthening spells on the wards, and laying down blankets to create temporary beds.

Molly had wanted to hide her daughter away from the world. She had been sure that Ginny would crumple under the pressure of so many responsibilities, or fear death now that it had taken Percy. And Ginny was the littlest one, the youngest, the baby. Molly might have clung to even a youngest son like that (though privately Ginny doubted it; her parents had always treated her differently because she was a girl, even as they denied that they did).

But Ginny had known that she would be stifled like that, and had pushed to break free, first by going to Woodhouse, and then staying in Hogwarts to help with the dueling class.

And she had been right to do it.

Even now, in the midst of grief, of reeling shock that the heart of the wizarding world had fallen, with so much death hanging around her and so many people she would never see again, Ginny had never felt so fiercely alive.

This was where she belonged, in the heart of a dangerous situation, dashing from one small crisis to the next, lending help because she was and could be a source of strength. Not imprisoned behind walls, but out in the middle of the battle where the refugees had fled.

Saving people.

Ginny gave a smile as she wiped away a Slytherin first-year’s tears that was part tenderness and part pure personal satisfaction. She preferred to think of the end of the war right now, and a Ministry that could be rebuilt, and the expressions on her parents’ faces when she applied to be an Auror, as she would.

She belonged in the heart of danger. Someday, she hoped, her mother and father would come to terms with that.

In the meantime, the expressions on their faces were certain to be priceless.

Zacharias had never felt so strong in his life.

The run through the tunnel after the spirit of his ancestor had been terrifying. The fear—the certainty—that they were losing Hufflepuffs behind them as they ran, that children were stumbling and falling, or that someone had taken a wrong turn in the darkness, sat on his shoulder like a living thing. And then he had stumbled out of the hole and not seen Hermione for a long moment, and terror had eaten him alive.

But then he had seen her, and the terror had relented, and Zacharias had remembered what he was: the most intelligent wizard in Hogwarts, the one who had never yet let fear overtake his reason.

And, now, one potential linchpin in a new Light resistance.

He was the son of the witch who led the British half of the Light alliance, and who was currently involved in some rather intense negotiations with neutral pureblood families to come to Harry's side. He was a close confidant of Harry's, and as good as married to the most intelligent witch in the country. He already wielded adult legal influence as his family's heir, and he had financial resources at his command, and even the romance of being Hufflepuff's heir, should he choose to use it.

The world had changed.

Zacharias would be one of those who insured that the change did not destroy all of them. He had already decided that. The world needed someone who would dig in stubbornly and never let go.

And badgers were very good at doing that.

Owen touched the burn on his brother's cheek cautiously. It had healed when he frantically applied medical magic to it, though it would leave an ugly scar. Owen was more concerned about the swelling on his head, which could indicate a concussion, and the fact that all attempts to wake Michael so far had been useless. Regulus Black had taken a cursory look at him and announced that there was nothing to be done. Michael might never wake up, but he was breathing deeply, steadily, and many other people weren't. Without Madam Pomfrey—whom they didn't know for sure had survived—they had no one who could say that Michael's sleep was dangerous.

So Owen was left to care for his twin in an out-of-the-way corner where no one would notice.

It wasn't as though his Lord needed him right now. Harry moved from station to station with the grace of a dancer, always where he was most needed at the moment. Now he was collecting information from a Ravenclaw student on her parents' names and direction, so that he could send an owl to them assuring them she was still alive. Now he applied his magic to a large wound in Justin Finch-Fletchley's side, making sure it slid shut and stopped threatening his life. Now he consulted with Snape, who had finally returned from the rubble with the news that no one lived beneath it, on the best way to phrase an announcement to the *Daily Prophet* in the morning. Harry didn't need taking care of right now.

But no one cared for Michael but him.

Owen turned his head back to his brother and rested his hand on the burn once more. Michael murmured and rolled towards him.

"If you wake up," Owen whispered, "it'll be different. I didn't know you were so full of hatred as to attack Voldemort like that. I know I haven't spent enough time with you, now. We haven't really talked about Mum and our sister, and we should. And maybe I can convince Harry to give you another chance. But you need to wake up, Michael." He watched his twin's shut eyes and felt a curl of despair in the center of his chest. "Please wake up."

Letters of fire flashed in front of his eyes. *He will.*

Harry's hand was on his shoulder then, and the scar on his arm tingled with warmth and sweetness. Owen looked up, seeking support despite the fact that he was really the one who should be offering it. "Really? Do you think so?"

I'll go into his mind and drag him out myself if he doesn't. Harry smiled at him and squeezed his shoulder. *We need him here.*

He turned away then, and Owen went back to his brother, a little soothed, a little calmed. Things were not perfect, but they were better than they had been, and on this dark night, that was all he could truly ask for.

Draco noticed when Harry slipped out of the room, of course. It seemed that no one else did. Snape was trying to cope with the demands of children still awake, as well as work out where other students might have fled and how they could contact them and the best way to tell some families that their children were dead. And for others, what mattered most was the effect Harry spread with his presence, rather than his presence itself: the sense that, really, everything would be all right after all, that they would come through this night and see the dawn.

But Draco's focus was Harry. He'd played the adult and the hero and the Slytherin leader. Now he wanted to be the boyfriend, the joined partner, and the source of strength, and so he followed Harry.

Harry walked out of Silver-Mirror altogether, into the darkness and the cold. Draco cast a Warming Charm on himself and kept walking, hoping Harry wouldn't Apparate. Harry didn't cast a glance behind him, as if he didn't care who followed him.

He halted at last on a broad, flat field of dead grass, and just stared up at the stars for a moment. Draco paused, confused.

Then Harry *screamed*.

Black lightning leaped from earth to heaven, a bolt that didn't go out, but formed itself around Harry and sheathed him in crackling, constantly twisting obsidian walls. Draco shivered. He could feel the pull of the lightning from here. Warmth flooded away from his skin, and for a moment it seemed as if his magic would follow it.

Harry's wail went on, a more extensive sound that Draco would have thought he could make with his ruined voice. It no longer sounded human. It was the scream of a great sea creature in terrible pain. It was the voice of someone, or something, who wanted very badly to die.

Or maybe kill his enemies, Draco thought, watching as the lightning split and Harry's arms extended towards the sky. Power rose around him, a curtain so dead black that it punished the night for existing. Snow at his feet froze into glittering chunks of glass. Serpents wreathed Harry, every inch of him, traveling back and forth across his body like the hive of the Many who lived in the Forbidden Forest. Or had lived. Draco wondered if Voldemort had killed them, too.

Harry screamed, and screamed.

And from the stars, something answered him.

An enormous white serpent with black, feathery wings curled down from overhead. Draco cowered. He knew this was the wild Dark, even if it didn't look like a manticore. Nothing else had that sense of grace and power about it. Nothing else was so inhuman. And nothing else could have come from starlight and yet looked like a child of dead worlds.

The white serpent gazed at Harry with cold blue eyes. And then it turned away and wreathed its body to the side and up in a loop that made the stars jangle like rung bells and the sky seam and crack like lava.

Harry answered it. His magic rose from the ground and then came down again like the stamp of a great boot. The earth shook. Draco stumbled to his knees in the snow, but never, never, took his eyes off the man he'd fallen in love with.

He knelt there as a terrible concussive dance he did not understand played out in front of him, the wild Dark looping and slithering and writhing runes across the sky, and Harry answering with jar after jar of magic, crash after crash of furious thunder. Draco sometimes had to close his eyes, and sometimes turn his head away. Harry was never less than beautiful in such a state, but grief and guilt and loathing had marred the beauty. Draco might observe this, but he could not share it.

He did look in time to see the end, as the white serpent came down like another bolt of lightning and briefly caged Harry in ice-blue fangs. Draco held his breath. Would it harm him, even now? His hand already clutched his wand before he made a conscious decision to do so.

But the wild Dark simply held Harry there. And Harry stood there looking as if he didn't care whether he lived or died.

The serpent uttered a freezing hiss that made Draco's hands curl and cramp. "Should you ever Declare for me," it whispered, "I would welcome such a servant. Remember that, *vates*. Should you need a sanctuary, a home, I offer it. For you are not only free,

you are also wild.”

Letters of fire appeared in the air in answer. Draco had to turn his head away again, bow it and stare at the ground.

I'm tired, and I want the end.

“We all grow weary of our assigned tasks, free one,” the wild Dark said. “Even I sometimes wish to shine at Midsummer instead of Midwinter. But this weariness will pass. Your strength is not yet played out.” It paused. Then it said, “Someday, it may be. When it is, I hope that you will come and consent to fly on my winds. I have lost a daughter tonight. There were wonders I never showed her. I wish to someday show them to you.”

The writing rippled and changed, hanging in the air like the shades of the Aurora Borealis. Draco read it from the corner of his eye.

There won't be enough left of me to do that, if I decide to end it.

The wild Dark chuckled, a sound that twisted into a hiss at the end. “You would be surprised by what measures magic takes to survive, free one. And, in the end, you *are* magic. Remember that. You are more than all the promises you make. You could turn your back on them, if you were a different kind of person, and abandon them. You have done enough in this fight.”

Sometimes I want to, the letters said.

“And then the night ends,” said the white serpent, and broke apart into flakes of snow that settled on Harry’s head. Harry stared at them, then looked up and towards the east. Following his gaze, Draco saw the first traces of false dawn.

He took a deep breath and stood.

Harry whipped around to face him. For a moment, his face was inhuman, stretched and scratched with mysteries that Draco didn’t know, like the shadows of bare tree branches.

And then he gave a little nod, whether in reply to Draco or the wild Dark he didn’t know, and walked past him towards Silver-Mirror.

His hand, freezing in such a way as to show he hadn’t cast a Warming Charm, brushed Draco’s in passing.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Six: Messengers of the Lightning

Hawthorn sat holding a mouthful of tea between her teeth and watched the headline as if the paper might burst.

But it didn’t. It just went right on saying what it said, in large letters, sprayed across the front page as if someone had painted rather than printed them.

HOGWARTS FALLS

There was no author’s name, though Hawthorn would have bet her newfound freedom that it was Rita Skeeter. They’d simply left off the name, she thought, as she dashed through the article, and shook her head. There was one photograph, but it was really all they needed, with Hogwarts gleaming with snow in the light of the moon and the stars.

She stood. The article contained little detail beyond the fact that the school had come down because of an attack by Voldemort, and that the “intrepid reporters” sent to the site had uncovered traces of Dark magic. No ideas about whether Harry had survived, about how many children had escaped in the fall, or about what had happened to Voldemort when he finished toppling the school—why he wasn’t currently ruling Britain, for example.

It did make her wonder, for one lonely moment, if Pansy had foreseen the school falling, if her beloved daughter had known that many of the students who lived around her on a daily basis were destined to die in a few years.

For now, Hawthorn would work on the assumption that Harry was alive, and to be found in one of the strongholds he’d established. It might take her some time to work through all the Floo connections and find them all, but she would locate him. Or she could try the phoenix song communication spell, of course, but she almost feared to. If the song warbled again and again and

called on nothing, if Harry lay in some cavern of cold and darkness under that fallen rock—

And then her wrist warbled.

Hawthorn closed her eyes, and shook her head. She'd swallowed the tea, but crumpled the *Prophet* in a sudden, too-firm grip. Breathing shallowly, she managed to force her eyes open, and ask in silence, "Yes? Who is it that's speaking to me?"

"Hawthorn," said Harry's voice.

And, though she'd tried to assume he was alive, it hadn't been such a default assumption, after all. Hawthorn let loose a quiet *whoosh* of breath and was thankful that she was sitting down, at least. "Harry," she said, voice far too alien to her ears. "You're alive."

"I am," said Harry. "And a fair number of us managed to escape the school's fall. We're at Silver-Mirror. I'm going to send an announcement to the Prophet in a short time, but we had matters to take care of first."

"You need apologize for nothing," Hawthorn whispered. "You have kept hope alive, Harry, and that's more than enough to make up for any delay."

Harry kept silent for a moment, as if he didn't know how to deal with that. Then his voice smoothed and streamlined. "Hawthorn. Can you come to Silver-Mirror? We are badly in need of competent adults, Dark or no, to help us get the children back to their families, and begin establishing the first steps of the government."

"Yes," said Hawthorn, standing. Her heart had started beating again, and, with it, the notion of ever fearing to contact Harry seemed silly and pointless, the kind of thing a child would hide from. "Of course I can, Harry. And I'm bringing a potion with me that you may find—interesting."

She could almost feel his eyebrows rise. He knew that her specialty was blood curses, not potions. But he said, "Whatever may help, Hawthorn. We're badly in need of hope," and then ended the communication spell.

Hawthorn turned and sped lightly up the stairs to her potions lab. She gathered up the notes on the lycanthropy treatment, the vials of potion she had—complete but for the final step, which required part of the magic from the person being cured—and as much as she could of the ingredients to be used for making more vials, shrinking them where that was practical and packing them carefully where it wasn't.

She hadn't talked to Harry about the potion yet partially because she was still trying to create a variant that wouldn't take such a toll in magical strength and strength of will from the patient, and partially because she'd wanted to carry the potion to him as a triumph in a dark moment, when he was most in need of hope.

I think that moment's come, don't you?

She swept the final notes into a book, shut the book, and tossed it into her trunk. Then she whirled down the steps to pack clothing. She knew it might be a long time before she could return to the Garden, a matter of months or more.

She didn't care. This was another chance to matter to Harry's cause, to do vastly important work. This was *wonderful*.

"It can wait a few hours."

You don't really believe that. Harry stared into Snape's eyes, and waited. This was the fifth argument they'd had in the last fifteen minutes. Harry suspected that they'd managed to have no arguments before those fifteen minutes only because Snape was struggling too hard under the pressure of thinking of himself as Headmaster to worry about Harry.

But now he suddenly seemed to realize that Harry hadn't slept yet, and he was trying to send him off to bed, even though Harry had just contacted Skeeter and she'd be arriving soon to carry the all-important news that many people had escaped Hogwarts to the *Prophet*.

Snape snarled at him now. "I think I can hold off an interfering woman for the time it will take you to nap," he said, and paced back and forth on the other side of a table crowded with maps, half-composed letters, and many, many other documents that made this room, Harry supposed, their default war room. Once, it had been a study. Snape whirled around and stared at him. "In the

past, when you have refused to sleep, you have been nearly useless to us in a short time,” he said, and Harry actually smirked at Snape’s highly unsuccessful attempt to soften his voice. “We can do this without you, Harry, in the interests of keeping our savior safe and healthy.”

You can’t, said Harry. If I’m not there when Skeeter arrives, she might start spreading rumors that I’m injured, or disfigured, or dead. She’s on my side as much as she’s on anyone’s, yes, but she also wants news to report. And the sooner we can get this report to the Prophet, the sooner we can start replacing panic with strength, rumors with real information. I’ll sleep later. He took another look at the list of names on the table. They only had a few unidentified ones left, those of children either too wounded or too hysterical last night to give coherent information about how to contact their parents. They should wake up soon—the effects of Calming Draughts and sleeping charms only lasting so long—and then they would, Harry hoped, be fit to talk.

“Is that a promise?”

Harry rolled his eyes. *Yes. It is.* Snape opened his mouth as if to begin badgering him again. Harry narrowed his eyes slightly and did some badgering of his own. *Why is it that you look ready to leap out of your skin every time Regulus walks into the same room?*

His father now looked ready to kill. Harry leaned an elbow on the table and studied Snape with a mild amusement he was relieved he could feel. Last night, when he was still full of the rage caused by the damage Voldemort had inflicted on so many innocents, he would have struck at the slightest sign of a threat. But the concussive dance with the wild Dark had helped him in more ways than he knew at the time. *Well?*

“That is none of your business,” Snape finally said, in a strangled tone. “I will tell you when I am ready to do so.”

Harry shrugged. *And my sleeping habits are none of yours.* He ignored Snape’s attempt to argue otherwise, putting the finishing touches on the letter that he intended to send Miriam Smith and the pureblood families she was addressing. They needed a government-in-exile *soon*. It was one thing for the British wizarding world to absorb the loss of the Ministry while Hogwarts was still standing; there was another building to direct hope and terror towards. But now that had fallen, too, and Harry was afraid that a substantial proportion of the wizarding population might simply *give up*. They were, at the very least, incapable of actually stepping up and defending themselves, as Candida Coltsfoot had proven all too well in the way she represented the Hogsmeade wizards and witches.

Regulus intruded before Snape could say anything coherent, murmuring, “Harry, our guest is at the wards.”

And *there* it was; Harry knew he hadn’t imagined it. Snape’s shoulders stiffened, and he looked as if he were keeping his back turned to Regulus with sheer force of will. Harry watched in slight amusement for a moment, then shrugged. Perhaps it really wasn’t any of his business.

That didn’t mean he wouldn’t bring it up if Snape tried interrogating him again, though.

He went to see Rita, while he kept the slight, bright amusement drifting in his mind. It was a slender reed to hang onto over the sea of emotions that he would be feeling otherwise, but he needed to use whatever he could. He was keeping just ahead of the tide that would incapacitate him. As long as he could do that, then he thought he would do well.

Voldemort tried to destroy Hogwarts, and our world, and the resistance, and me. I can only let him have succeeded in the first of those goals.

Rita had to admit, as she looked around the entrance hall of Silver-Mirror, that this was the kind of headquarters Harry should have had all along. The enormous pool of golden fire overhead, with drops of light sliding down chains that stretched to the walls to light lamps and then crawling back up the chains again to the pool, would have made a dramatic background for stories of the Boy-Who-Lived and his Alliance of Sun and Shadows. Her photographer would have loved to take pictures here and make subtle and important points with them on the front page of the *Prophet*. And since Harry had ended up claiming the Black name as his own, he could have done it at any time. Rita wondered why he hadn’t.

“Hello, Rita.”

She turned, and saw Harry coming out of a door in the right wall. And she raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow, because she had expected a boy frazzled by the loss of his home, or, at best, a leader who had seen many of his friends and followers die.

Instead, Harry watched her with calm green eyes, and lifted one eyebrow right back to her. He wore robes smudged and stained from the travails of a long flight, with spots of melted snow and blood, but he looked as if he had passed through those trials and come out the stronger for them. Rita was grudgingly impressed, and also felt a stirring of interest. *This* was what her readers would want to see, this young man, the hero, the Boy-Who-Lived.

If Harry was merely putting on a façade, it was still an impressive one, because Rita couldn't tell that it was a façade. She nodded to him, and took one of the chairs placed together in the middle of the hall. "Harry," she said. "How many people would you say escaped the fall of the school?"

"We have nearly sixty people here now," said Harry, as if he'd expected the question, and sat down in the other chair. "Those numbers might seem small, but remember that many children went home for the winter holidays. And there are probably other, smaller groups which escaped in other directions. The number of individuals who might be at home now, or in St. Mungo's being treated, is countless, of course. I hope that they will make their presence known as soon as possible, so that we can sort the living from the dead and have hope. Voldemort did not succeed in what he tried to do."

"What would you say was his most important goal?" Rita scribbled furiously, not caring if Harry did look at her with a certain amusement. This was one of the most important tools in the battle to wipe off the defeated expressions she'd seen that morning in the office, before the amulet squeezed and she could tell her co-workers that Harry was still alive.

"To inflict a psychic wound on us that we couldn't recover from." Harry folded his hands serenely in his lap. Rita almost regretted that. A tug at his sleeve or collar would have said he was human, and would have been the kind of telling detail she cherished, though she probably wouldn't have reported it to her readers. "To kill me if he could. To take children as hostages, or drain their magic."

"And did anyone caught in the fall survive it?" Rita removed the charm on her quill that slightly altered the words it copied down. Harry's words were too good not to be taken straight as they were.

"No," said Harry. "Headmaster Snape went back to the ruins to check, but sensed no trace of life."

Rita checked at the *Headmaster Snape*, but Harry went on looking as if nothing were wrong, so she continued writing. "And what are your plans from this point forward?"

"In the short term, to return the surviving children to their parents, and inform those whom we know for certain have lost their sons and daughters." Harry's smile was sad. "To search for the missing. To mourn for the dead. For example, we know that Headmistress Minerva McGonagall perished before the school began to fall.

"In the long term?" He lifted his head, and Rita caught a gleam of magic around him, and a smell like mountain snow in alpine meadows on cold winter mornings. "To establish a wizarding government that will address the concerns and problems of the new world we have now. To work with people who want to help, whether or not they had children at Hogwarts or will swear the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. To ask for international help in evacuations, in finding and securing food, and accepting and resettling refugees. I know several wizards in the French Ministry who have offered to show me how their offices coped with such demands in the war against Grindelwald, when many French wizards and witches had to leave their homes. Their help is, of course, welcome."

Rita paused. She wasn't entirely sure that what she said next would go into the article, but it was a question that she wanted to ask for her own peace of mind. "Have you ever thought of giving up, Harry?"

She got a baring of teeth, and a gleam from green eyes, and a lift of a proud head that would have done a unicorn credit. "Never."

Rita nodded. Then she returned to asking how he intended to pursue the war against Voldemort.

Amazingly, it seemed that Harry had spoken the truth: he had come through one of the worst things that could happen and retained his strength. Voldemort's strike to inflict that psychic wound had cost the Dark Lord more than he could have possibly gained.

Rita was glad that she lived in a world where such things happened, and in a time when she could report on them.

Harry leaned an elbow on the windowsill and watched as the first round of owls flew away. They carried the most urgent news: the letters asking for firmer alliances or for practical advice from the French and Spanish Ministries, and telling parents their

children were still alive. Of course parents deserved to know if their children were definitely dead, too, or missing, but the news could wait the few hours it would take the owls to come back with their messages.

He meant what he'd told Skeeter. They would come through this, pile the wreckage back up and climb out of the hole, because they had to. Voldemort had made a mistake as he did at everything, because he had failed to actually *kill* Harry.

“Harry.”

He turned around curiously. Owen stood behind him, his face weary, but stretched in a wide smile.

“Michael’s awake,” he said simply. “And he’s asking for you.”

Arching his eyebrows, Harry followed Owen to his brother’s bedside. Michael, like so many, lay on a makeshift pallet of blankets in one of Silver-Mirror’s side-rooms. And now his eyes were open, and more peaceful than Harry had seen them in a long time, perhaps since Michael first confessed to having a crush on Draco.

He knelt down beside the other boy, and waited for him to speak. Michael seemed content to regard him a long time in silence before he did so.

“I realize now how stupid I was to hate you,” he whispered.

Harry blinked. He hadn’t expected that, either.

“You can’t cause harm to my family the way Voldemort can,” Michael continued. “And then I tried to strike back at him for my mother’s death, and my sister’s, and he slapped me aside like a bug.” He touched the burn on his cheek self-consciously. Harry had been trying not to stare at it. It looked as though a four-fingered hand had sunk into Michael’s skin, and because they had no trained mediwizards among them, he would probably wear the brand for life. Harry made a mental note to contact St. Mungo’s as soon as possible. Some of the refugees would need to be treated for delayed shock and spell damage. “And you’re the only one we have who can actually fight him. So I’m going to do my best not to hate you any more, and to help you instead of hinder you. I wanted you to know that.”

Harry nodded. He’d used glamour charms to disguise the screech in his voice when he spoke with Skeeter, and magic to boost his whisper to the point where it could actually be understood, but he still didn’t want to speak aloud when he didn’t have to. He did sign in the air, *I understand. Thank you.*

Michael seemed content with the words. He closed his eyes and lay back on the blankets, and Owen helped him, hands fussing tenderly around his brother. Harry smiled. He was sure he would have done the same thing if Connor had been injured in the escape from the castle.

He stood, and went to write the letters to St. Mungo’s, and the parents whose children were dead. He suspected the one to Luna’s father would hurt the most. But he couldn’t afford to give up and think about that hurt. He would keep his head above water, and continue swimming.

Jing-Xi clasped her hands around the cup of mulled wine and drank deeply from it. It made quite a change to be sitting inside the warm, dry safehouse, protected by house elf magic, and with the knowledge that the wizards and witches she’d been escorting now had warm beds and warm drinks of their own, from stumbling across rocky islands in the freezing wind, trying to remember the right way to locate the wards that would tell her where the house was.

She’d expected one of her friends to call upon her sooner or later, and so wasn’t surprised when the air in front of her turned yellow and opened. She was surprised to see Alexandre staring at her from the window, instead of Pamela or Coatlicue. They were the two she was closest to in actual friendship, if one didn’t count the odd bond with Kanerva that Jing-Xi knew was really only a friendship to her.

“Alexandre?” she asked. “What is it?”

“Greetings, Jing-Xi,” said the Dark Lord, his voice overly formal. “I am glad that you have escaped the ruin of Hogwarts, though of course sad to hear that a powerful witch who shares my allegiance is gone from the world.”

Jing-Xi set the wine down with a bump. “What happened?” she demanded, and rose to her feet. Her magic turned the chair she sat

on to ivory. The only sign that Alexandre might be impressed was his eyebrow creeping up. Of course, Harry was the only Lord-level wizard Jing-Xi had ever met who showed open signs of awe at her power.

“The Pact has heard the news,” he said, “including the news of Kanerva’s draining and your survival. So they held a—discussion—about what to do.”

Jing-Xi bowed her head slightly, staring at Alexandre from beneath her eyelids. Her hair constantly stirred around her, movements that had become stronger since their mistress perished. Kanerva’s winds would never leave her, Jing-Xi knew, and she suspected that any stragglers left in the world had migrated to join the enchantment that surrounded her. “If they were to speak together, I should have been notified. And so should Harry, if they actually want him to obey the laws that govern the Pact.”

“They felt they already knew what you would say,” Alexandre commented, face utterly blank.

And just like that, Jing-Xi knew the truth. She said quietly, “They decided against me. Against Harry.”

“Oh, no, do not call it deciding *against* you,” Alexandre murmured. “Call it a vote for the continuance of tradition. Call it a weighing of one part of the world against the rest. Call it a chance for young Harry to prove himself. Even Monika argued tenderly, and movingly, that you should have the opportunity to devote yourself to China without worrying about the British Isles. Oh, how brilliantly she argued. One would think that you had never had a better friend in the world, and that Harry cared only about using you to benefit his own selfish interests.”

“They want me to leave Britain,” Jing-Xi said.

“Yes,” said Alexandre, with a slow, owl’s blink.

“And if I do not?”

“They will send Brewer and Elena to retrieve you.” Alexandre touched a curl of prophecy that suddenly showed itself above his right shoulder. “Clearly, you cannot be allowed to remain. You are disturbing the balance of Lord-level power by staying where you are, and this war is not yours to fight. They are fearful that you might be tempted to go on the offensive, and break the Pact’s dictates, after Voldemort’s smashing of Hogwarts. They think that you need to be recalled home. If you think about it,” he added, in that inflectionless voice, “they are really and truly protecting you from yourself.”

Jing-Xi closed her eyes in frustration. They were right not to send Brewer alone. Jing-Xi could handle the Light Lord of South Africa. He never made up his mind on anything unless pushed. She could have talked him out of what the Pact wanted, especially by showing him images of the refugees and hinting that their wretched condition was his fault in some way. His guilt complex was very strong.

But Elena...the Dark Lady of Peru had no pity in her. And Jing-Xi did not dare allow her to set foot on Britain’s shores, whether she came with the Pact’s permission or not. Where Elena went, people disappeared. No one had yet managed to figure out what she did with them, not even Coatlicue, who geographically was closest to her. The people of Britain had already suffered enough. They did not deserve to attract any of Elena’s dead-eyed attention.

Which, doubtless, was the reason the Pact had detailed both her and Brewer to fetch Jing-Xi back. They knew the threat of Elena would make her listen.

“I hate them, sometimes,” she whispered, and she did not even care if Alexandre carried the words back to them.

“Now, come, Jing-Xi,” Alexandre said. “How can one make a difference in discussions that one is not invited to? Come back and speak in your own voice. In time, it might make a difference.”

She raised her head and stared at him. Then she shook her head. “You are the hardest of any in the Pact to understand,” she murmured.

Alexandre smirked as if she had given him a great compliment. “Compared to prophecies and their life-interaction, I am very simple,” he said. “The Pact did say that they would wait a few days before sending Brewer and Elena, to give you time to ‘come to your senses.’ So you might as well use the time to tell Harry that you’re departing, and why.”

“And that he’ll have to struggle against Voldemort on his own,” Jing-Xi murmured, her mood growing bleak again.

“The Dark Lord should watch himself,” said Alexandre. “The air around Britain is *alive* with prophecies, all intertwined. The future does not favor him. And the Dark has punished him so that he cannot fight Harry until the spring equinox.”

Jing-Xi had to smile at that. A bleak wind never blew without some bright cloud hanging on it. “I will tell him.”

She stood silent when Alexandre had vanished, considering. She could not defy the Pact, not when such defiance earned innocent people punishment, or could start a war among the Lords and Ladies.

But perhaps she could work at a distance to do the right thing. She would not give up and go tamely away. The Light did not yield so easily.

Indigena stooped over her Lord and swiped at his forehead with a wet rag. When they returned home, her Lord had told her his newest plan with a minimum of elaborations. It would fall on the spring equinox, the first day that he could strike back against Harry and use his *absorbere* gift again. In the meantime, Indigena was to tend his body, and make sure that no enemies came near the burrow.

And she would tend her garden and not have to participate in torture of any kind, though perhaps some killing.

He had not even questioned her about the deaths of Oaken and Sylvan.

Indigena sat in her garden when she had finished cleaning her Lord and setting up new wards that wouldn't permit anyone but her to enter. She lifted her head to a piquant breeze warmed by the charms around the garden and tinted with the sharp scent of snow, and sniffed it.

It felt as though a year had turned back, and she stayed with her Lord because she was the only Death Eater left, and because he was running a long, subtle plan that he would need someone to guard him throughout.

She had never felt so content since she took the Mark.

She did stiffen when the wards cast a cascade of scents into her nostrils, and she saw Evan standing on the edge of her garden and staring at her. But he said nothing. He didn't even smile. He simply regarded her with that same intense gaze for long moments, then reached under his robe.

In silence, he held up the golden Hufflepuff Cup.

And then he vanished away, and left Indigena with a faint shiver of both fear and relief to add to the half-warm, half-cold breeze.

Harry looked up from his letters when Regulus walked into the room. The man had the *oddest* expression on his face. *What is it?* Harry asked via green letters, wondering if it had something to do with Snape. If it did, he would refuse to help. Whatever lay between them was solely between them, and they really should deal with it on their own.

“Harry, there are—” Regulus cut off for a moment, then shook his head. “There are Unspeakables at the wards,” he said.

Harry stood. *Come to attack us?*

“They say—” Regulus cleared his throat. “They say that they're from the Stone. And they're here to offer us an alliance. The Stone survived the collapse at the Ministry. It finds you—interesting. And now that it's drawn new servants to it and bound them, it wants to offer you its help, and the help of those artifacts that it did manage to preserve when the Department was attacked.”

As if in a dream, Harry followed Regulus into the main hall of Silver-Mirror. There stood two gray-cloaked men, though both with their hoods thrown back so he could see their faces. And one of them held a gray stone with a dragon's head projecting from it, which Harry recognized from the time, long ago, when the Unspeakables had made an attack on Woodhouse.

“Greetings,” hissed the dragon's head. “I have an alliance for you.” Then it paused. “Was that too formal? Too immoral?”

Harry shook his head. He didn't know what would happen next, and the fact was starting to worry him a little.

But, as with the emotions and the new government, he just had to continue swimming, and do his best to keep his head above water.

Not immoral at all, he said. Please come in.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Christmas In a Rush

REACTIONS TO HOPE:

Wizarding populace of Britain torn

By: Rita Skeeter

In response to Harry Black's speech about hope that ran in this paper yesterday, wizards and witches all across the country have owed us to let us know how they feel about a new government. Below are printed excerpts of their letters.

"I suppose it's the best we can do for now," says Mary Hostess, who so far has been unable to leave Britain due to her shop in Diagon Alley, Mary's Marvelous Mixes. "But I do hope that the wizarding government, whatever it calls itself and whoever heads it, is established now. There are a thousand and one things that you never realize the Ministry did until it was gone."

"I don't think Harry Black ought to have a part in the new government at all, to be honest," said Georgianna Fallfair, who lives in Muggle London. "He couldn't prevent the fall of the Ministry, and he couldn't even prevent the fall of Hogwarts, where he lived and many of his friends went to school. It's time that he step aside and let someone without such a blemished record take over. It would increase people's trust in this new government."

"The Light wizards and the Order of the Firebird are committed to working with the vates." Cupressus Apollonis, leader of the Irish half of the new alliance which has taken to calling itself the Hope for Light, sounded calm and confident in his letter. "We are engaged in talks still with many families who feel left aside or pushed out of the sun, but we make constant progress. We need Harry Black, his magic and his good sense and his reputation. We absolutely cannot function without him."

Miriam Smith, the British leader of Hope for Light, echoed Apollonis's sentiments in her communication. "There may have been a time when we shied at the thought of him or decided that his crimes were too great to permit him inclusion in our fellowship, but that time is past. It must be. We have suffered too many losses striving against each other while He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wins victories. If nothing else, the fall of Hogwarts and the Ministry should have taught us that our internal conflicts are petty compared to the threat that faces us."

Breaking with a family tradition of public silence and neutrality that has lasted for more than six decades, Peridot Yaxley issued an announcement that the House of Yaxley considers themselves at Harry's service, with the exception of Indigena Yaxley, who decided to join You-Know-Who, and the twins Sylvan and Oaken, who also became Death Eaters and were killed in the fall of the school.

Lucius Malfoy, though still laboring under a shadow from his service to You-Know-Who, sent a letter in which he declared his confidence in both Harry Black and his heir Draco Malfoy and that, "If anyone can drive You-Know-Who from Britain's shores, it will be them."

However, others cited concerns originating in Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper's term in office, including the fact that Britain has been condemned for breaking the International Statute of Secrecy and its wizards could face sanctions when traveling to other countries—an especial concern now, when so many are considering flight to foreign wizarding communities.

"I think Black has our world's best interests at heart," said Hugh Johnson, a father of three from Wales, "but he simply doesn't have any idea how to serve them. The devastating losses in the past few weeks show that."

"Too young," agreed a witch who signed her letter only as Faustine. "We need to start thinking more about international guidance, and the way that Britain's actions reflect our reputation on the world stage. Letting Black lead alone will just solidify that reputation as a bad one in most eyes."

It remains to be seen whether the latest effort to build a wizarding government in Britain is stable or not...

Zacharias shook the Floo powder and soot off his robes, and then inclined his head to his mother as he stepped away from the

fireplace. She had come to wait for him without, of course, making it seem as if she were waiting for him. She rose to her feet with her hands clasped in front of her waist.

“You did not bring Hermione with you?” she asked then, eyebrows arching. “I would have thought she would want to spend Christmas with her fiancé’s family.”

Zacharias hid a chuckle. No need to voice the thought that it was a bad idea for Hermione and Miriam to meet in person just yet, as opposed to talking through owl post or the Floo connections. “She’s incredibly involved in the process of setting up the new government,” he said, kissing his mother’s hand. “And, of course, waiting to see what progress reports I bring back from the Hope for Light.”

Miriam nodded as if that was perfectly understandable, now that it was explained, and turned to lead him out of the receiving room. “Most of them are at least listening,” she said. “The biggest problems come from those who want considerations and concessions now, and won’t fight without at least the promise of them.”

“Harry could promise them all he liked,” Zacharias muttered. He knew the kinds of things his mother was talking about: powerful positions in a newly-opened Ministry, individual protection for important family assets that couldn’t be moved out of Britain, guarantees that Dark wizards wouldn’t have as much access to influence as the Light ones would. “That doesn’t mean that he needs to keep the promises.”

Miriam gave him a long look, then said, “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that, Zacharias. You know as well as I do that someone who makes his promises must keep them, or risk falling into the Dark’s tactics.”

Zacharias tilted his head up and smiled innocently at her. “But, Mother, Harry is undeclared. It’s not the same as a Light wizard binding himself with oaths in the name of the allegiance we all serve. He can wag his tongue and not endanger his honor or his reputation. In the eyes of most people here, he doesn’t have much honor, surely?”

Miriam hissed under her breath. “Being among Dark wizards has made you forget our ways, my son.”

“No.” Zacharias folded his arms and gave his mother a smug glance. “What it’s taught me is that people are often more forgiving than they appear—or more careless. They might *say* they’ll only agree to fight with you for prices that you can’t afford to pay, but in practice they’ll usually grumble and agree to go along for some lesser offer. And that’s particularly true in the face of a threat like Voldemort, whom they don’t want to face alone even if they act like they do.”

“I didn’t teach you to haggle like a fishmonger, Zacharias.” Miriam’s eyes were slits.

“No, you didn’t,” Zacharias agreed calmly. “Hermione did. And when I saw, for the first time, how many people assumed she was a pureblood just because she knew the right words and wore the right clothes—well, I knew a truth you could have spent a hundred years trying to teach me in the Light way and I would never have learned, Mother.” He considered changing that statement—after all, he was intelligent enough to learn anything he wanted to, truly—but Miriam didn’t like him to harp constantly on his wits, so in the end he let it lie. “People *can* be fooled by the surface. And if they’re stupid enough to let themselves be fooled that way, then it’s not the fault of the person offering. They’ll go along with the polished surface and be happy. The person making the offer is happy, too, at having to pay less, and at having fooled them. And so everyone becomes joyful in more, well, flexible ways than the old, stiff-necked codes of honor allow.”

“I am not so sure that it was a good idea to let you spend more time with the girl after all,” his mother murmured, “if this is what comes out of it.”

“You taught me politics,” said Zacharias, lifting his head. “You taught me honor. You taught me the ancient magic that let me save Hermione’s life in the battle at Midsummer. I will never forget that. But she taught me to live in the real world, Mother. Our training would only prepare us for that if *everyone* followed the old dances, and they do not. The Dark wizards use different traditions, anyway, and the number of Muggleborns coming into the world means that, eventually, we won’t be able to cow them any more, and we’ll be left behind as they develop new ways of living. I want to have both power and honor. That is what will insure the survival of what is pure and potent and good in our culture, not insisting that change never happened.”

Miriam lingered where she was for a long moment, her eyes focused on him. Then she gave a little shake of her head, and said, “Well. That is certainly an impressive speech, Zacharias.”

By that, she meant to convey that it wasn’t at all, of course, but Zacharias did not care. He’d known what would happen when he came home, ostensibly for Christmas holidays but really to meet the Light families gathered at the Smith estate and finalize the bonds of their alliance with Harry. He’d spent a long time thinking and meditating on it, especially since there was little unique

that he could contribute back at Silver-Mirror.

And he knew from the slight widening of his mother's eyes that she was truly impressed.

He gave her a smile as small as the shake of her head had been, and then turned towards the formal doors of the Smith Great Hall. "Shall we show them what world we represent now, Mother?"

Harry closed his eyes and put the letter gently aside. All it bore was a note of thanks from Luna's father, for letting him know of his daughter's death and how she had died. But it had affected Harry far more than any profound effusion or outpouring of blame could have. It reminded him that Mr. Lovegood really was all alone in the world now, and it made him blame himself for the death more.

"Why do you have tears in your eyes?"

Harry started and turned to look at the block of gray stone with the dragon's head projecting out of it, which sat on the other side of the table and watched him with bright, intelligent eyes like flecks of mica. The Stone was—interesting—in its attempts to understand the humans around it. It seemed concerned with morality and immorality above all things, and Harry had caught it in a long conversation with Thomas the other day about the differences between the Light and Dark, with the Stone listening like an eager pupil. Finally, Thomas appeared to have found the perfect audience for him, the one who wanted to hear as much as he wanted to tell.

"The letter made me sad," he said simply.

"But why?" The Stone's dragon head twisted, trying to see the parchment itself. "It concerns someone who's dead. Why do humans spend so much time thinking about the dead? Why not the living?"

Harry was not sure he was the best person to explain this, but he spread his hands and said, "Imagine that humans are all tied together by means of their emotions. Can you imagine that?"

"It is *true*," said the Stone, with a small amount of bewilderment in its voice. "There is no need to imagine it."

Harry nearly smiled, but the memory of Luna's death and the fact that the Stone might want to know this kind of thing for very important reasons kept the expression from his face. "Well. When a human dies, as long as someone loved her and was close to her, those connections remain. They're ripped and shredded the way that someone's guts are ripped and shredded when someone tries to disembowel her. They keep reaching out to the dead person, even though she's gone. Eventually, most people do come to care more about the living around them again, but it takes time, because those torn connections are so visible. Can you see that?"

The Stone hissed, a small amount of steam wafting past its teeth. "That does make more sense," it said after a moment. "But I wonder why some of you mourn more than others, and how you continue fighting for the living without tripping over the dangling guts of your grief."

"I don't think that anyone can give you the answer to that one," said Harry simply. "Because no one knows."

"I will ask Thomas. He knows everything else." The Stone grew sculptured wings that sprouted from its sides and flew away, swooping around the edge of the doorway and towards the library, where Thomas usually was.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair for a moment. It was rare these days that he could simply be alone, without someone dashing in to ask his opinion on a solution or demand his help in a crisis. In fact, someone would probably appear now that he'd thought that.

But no one did for a little while, and that meant he could think, and think, and think.

Wonderful things had happened in the past few days. Hawthorn had arrived with a possible cure for lycanthropy, assuming they could fine-tune it so that it wouldn't be so deadly to anyone without an immense amount of magical strength and willpower—and even then, Harry wasn't sure if it would work for someone born a Muggle. The Stone had handed over several artifacts from the Department of Mysteries that Thomas was studying, so that he could best work them into more elaborate defenses for the safehouses. Dark and Light wizards were coming together in the face of disaster and striving to establish a wizarding government—though Harry supposed that might be for the purpose of arguing more conveniently than they could do in the present situation. Jing-Xi had had to depart, but she had told Harry that she planned to argue the Pact into submission with the help of her friends,

and she had given him the good news about Voldemort not being able to harm anyone with his draining ability until the spring equinox. There was hope everywhere.

And then a single letter could come, and make him remember the dead.

Harry shook his head fiercely and rose to his feet. Yes, someone was probably on her way to interrupt him even now, but a message or a crisis could wait a few minutes. He had to get out of this house briefly, or he would go mad.

He lowered the wards for the instant it took him to Apparate outside, and, once there, he jumped to the cliffs of Cornwall and Copley-by-the-Sea. Harry closed his eyes and listened to the Atlantic slamming again and again on the rocks far below. His breathing calmed, but he knew that meditation and simple relaxation wouldn't help much. If it could have, then his Occlumency and his slow slipping into sleep with Draco every night would have been enough.

He needed a magical release, and so he opened his eyes and sought it.

This time, he chose a white lightning bolt, if only in homage to the black lightning bolt of Midwinter night that no one but Draco had seen. He whirled it around his head, feeling it crackle with energy in his hand, magic that tingled and jolted up his arm but then met his natural defenses and slid away like a dog with its tail between its legs again. Then he tossed it away from him.

It writhed and danced in the air, and then broke apart into flakes like snow, though where they fell into the sea, they provided sparks of dazzling light instead of spots of cold. Harry sent his breath up in front of his face, and formed it into a small dragon in imitation of the Stone, which he tossed in several different directions before it found its wings. It squeaked indignantly at him and swooped down the cliffs in search of food and warmth.

His magic had increased since he'd ripped power away from Voldemort the night of the Hogwarts attack. What that meant, in practice, was that he was more restless and easily irritated than before, more prone to needing time to himself and to exercise his magic, and more drawn to the songs of Light and Dark that he could hear echoing just beyond the earth.

He still prayed never to become a Lord, never to think of himself as so superior to people that he would destroy them without a thought. But he could see now why some of them, like Kanerva, like Monika, were so utterly detached from the world around them. It was easy to think of the magic that seethed beneath his skin as the important thing when it was in every breath he drew.

Not so. It never was so.

If he released it, like this, then he didn't have so much of it, and so he stopped thinking that way for a while. So he released ascending rings of white light, and turned the grass beneath his feet to glass so that the magic could have the pleasure of transfiguration, and breathed so hard in the direction of the ocean that the waves actually lifted and swayed to his breath.

Finally, Harry decided that enough time had passed, and Apparated back to Silver-Mirror. Regulus was waiting, patiently, to confer with Harry about whether they should accept representatives from groups claiming to be acting in "the public interest."

Harry was glad it was Regulus who found him. Of anyone in the house, he seemed the most congenial, the one most likely to hold off on snapping out of either impatience, preoccupation with his own problems, or genuine concern for Harry.

Snape did not find Regulus Black's presence congenial.

As usual, the man was doing no more than standing behind him while Snape brewed a potion, but that was quite enough. He stood, and he did not speak about inconsequential matters, which would have made him no worse than many a student chattering nervously about detention; nor did he make obvious coughs to announce his presence, which would have meant he wanted Snape's attention and Snape could easily deny it, and thus be in control. He stood and stared, and Snape knew the mind behind those eyes was working through a procession of thoughts that he did not like, did not approve of.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He put down the vial of Veritaserum—which would be essential to the new government, deny it though Harry might—and turned to face Regulus. "Why are you here?" he asked sharply.

Regulus smiled at him. That caused Snape to falter. Regulus had retreated when questioned before this, or simply shook his head and gone on staring, as if Snape should know the reason and he wouldn't voice it. Now, the smile, and it was going to begin a conversation Snape did not want to have.

“You know the reason,” said Regulus. “What I told you when the school was falling. I love you.”

Snape closed his eyes. He would not say that he was nauseated, but that word came closest to describing what he was feeling: the swooping sensation in his belly, the hair standing up on the back of his neck, the desire to lunge forward and find a loo before he emptied the contents of his stomach.

“You cannot,” he said at last.

Regulus shrugged. Snape knew that, though he didn’t open his eyes to see it. He knew Regulus so well he could predict his actions with his eyes shut, and he had never wanted to know anyone that well—at least, someone who was not Harry. “No one says that love has to have rules, Severus. And this love has been peculiar enough already, with the way I’ve felt it and the way I’ve pursued it and the obstacles that have tried to get in its way. I don’t see why the object has to be normal.”

It took Snape several tries before he could speak. During all of them, he kept his eyes firmly shut. “Regulus, you will do yourself an injury if you love me.” He got the words out, though they clung to the sides of his throat like bread soaked with gravy. “We lead separate lives. You are the brother of the student who made me most miserable throughout my years of school. We were separated for fourteen years, and when you returned, you had a much younger body than mine. You *still* do.” It had not escaped his notice, though it seemed to have escaped Regulus’s, that, physically, Regulus was twenty-two, while Snape himself was thirty-eight, very nearly. “We do not *know* each other. Any love you have of me is based either on memories so old they are inevitably distorted by now, or on a fundamental misunderstanding of who we are in relation to one another. Especially of who I am.”

“I know all the difficulties,” said Regulus easily. “I don’t care. I even know that you’re jealous of me for Harry’s taking Black as his last name. I don’t care about that, either.”

Snape opened his eyes. “I am not jealous.”

And then he wished that he had had the sense not to look, because Regulus’s gaze captured his, earnest and calm both at once, so deep a gray that Snape could almost forget Sirius Black had had the same eyes. He did not manage to glance away. He screamed about that, deep in the back of his mind.

Regulus murmured, “I wouldn’t *expect* much from you, Severus, other than acknowledgment. I anticipated this battle. I know it will take time. But I want your acknowledgment, and your pledge that you will not turn a cold shoulder to me, the way you have been.” He waved a hand to encompass the time they’d been in Silver-Mirror since the attack on Hogwarts, never looking away from Snape.

“I cannot be who you wish me to be,” said Snape flatly. “Not someone worthy of receiving love, nor capable of giving it.”

“You seem to do just fine with Harry.”

Snape took a deep breath. He trusted this man as a friend, at least, and he had never known Regulus to betray a confidence when they were both Death Eaters.

Now who is speaking from distorted memories of a time dead and gone?

But he pressed forward. It might be that, if he did voice the most powerful and nagging of the doubts that were trying to overcome him, Regulus would understand the futility of forcing the issue.

“Harry needed my help. He was younger than I, someone horribly abused, whom I could—save and rescue.” And those words stuck in his craw even more than “love” had. “I did stupid things in the name of that love, and it was only a combination of good luck and his own compassionate nature that made him forgive me. The power dynamic between us was always tilted towards me.”

And here came the words he did not want to speak, but had to, if Regulus was ever to understand why his quest to have Snape as a lover was hopeless.

“You are stronger than I am. You came through imprisonment and torture that would have stolen the sanity of most other men, and you are still sane. I cannot—I cannot stand for someone to have that type of control over me. I cannot have a lover who is stronger than I am.”

He turned away, his cheeks so hot that he felt as if he had swallowed fireweed, and once again been preparing the Veritaserum.

Regulus said nothing for long moments. Snape strained his ears for some sound of the other man's going away, and told himself he was not.

Then arms closed around his middle, and Regulus's voice whispered in his ear, "I don't care."

Snape successfully kept himself from responding, because he was not capable of responding, not the way Regulus desired, but his despair and sickness increased, until he felt as if he fell down a long, dark pit, the bottom of which he could not see.

It was a rushed and hurried Christmas, in Draco's eyes, but in the wake of the Hogwarts attack, it was hard to see how it could have been anything else.

Gifts had been left behind in their mad flight, and they had had no time to make or procure more, with the frantic hurry to set up a new government that had taken over Silver-Mirror in the past few days. Christmas mostly meant a slightly richer meal than normal, with more people sitting at the table instead of scurrying off to eat hastily in their own corners while they read books of law or drafted letters or spoke via the phoenix song spell to other people, and a chance to see his father.

Draco didn't know why he had expected to find Lucius *affected* by the news of the Hogwarts disaster. Of course he would not be. His own son and heir was among the survivors, and he was now perfectly positioned to craft the kind of life that would make people forget his villainy: advising said son and heir and, through him, the Boy-Who-Lived.

The fact that Draco never intended to let his father manipulate him again was somewhat beside the point, really. Lucius still intended to try. Draco knew that from the gentle smile he received, and the gift his father gave him without even a comment to prepare him. Draco drew back the blue cloth from a small object and saw there a miniature of his mother.

The picture was unmoving; presumably, it had been a portrait done immediately after or before her marriage to Lucius, because it was still a custom to present a new bride or groom like that, in the full blush of that beauty and happiness that would never come again, unchanged even by movement. His mother wasn't smiling, and her blonde hair was coiled closely around her neck, and her blue eyes were bright with something Draco would not have called happiness. But there was still something *radiant* about Narcissa, like the light shining on ice. Nothing could diminish it, not even her death, and not even the circumstances of the gift.

And not even the fact that his father had almost certainly handed it to him intending to shock him and see how much he still grieved for Narcissa.

Draco looked up and faced his father with his calmest, coolest, most unmoving gaze. "Thank you, Lucius," he said, without any emotion at all, and then turned to seek out Harry.

He could feel Lucius's eyes on his back, and his father puzzling out why that had not worked the way he wanted it to. He didn't look around. He was not about to give the bastard the satisfaction.

Carefully, with hands that did not shake, he threaded the miniature around his neck on its ribbon. According to ancient tradition, he should be wearing Harry's portrait there already, and not his mother's, but also, according to tradition, his father should never have let the portrait out of his sight.

If he wishes to play games, he should know that his opponent can cheat just as well as he can.

Draco stood near Harry, because he had to. Harry was hugging his brother at the moment, and chatting amiably enough with his girlfriend. Parvati still irritated Draco, with her automatic assumptions that no one Dark was really good enough to be Harry's boyfriend, but though she met his eyes and frowned, she didn't offer any insults. That was enough to make Draco be quiet in his turn.

He watched Professor Snape and Regulus Black stand on the other side of the room, and pointedly not talk to each other. He shook his head. Snape reminded him of Harry, sometimes, in his determination to ignore the consequences of someone else's feelings for him. That just meant that Regulus should be more like Draco, of course, and Draco could do nothing to help him if he refused to be.

Zacharias Smith and Hermione Granger stood in another corner, heads close together, talking about something that seemed to require a hundred hand gestures. Draco snorted to himself. The Light part of their alliance was slowly but surely coming together, and he had to give Smith credit for a good portion of that, as well as the influence of Granger, who kept him sane and rational.

Weasley—the girl—was looking flustered as she carried food back and forth from the table to the kitchen. Apparently she'd had a screaming match with her parents earlier over her decision not to leave Silver-Mirror. Draco was sorry for missing it.

Augusta Longbottom held court at the feasting table; she'd not come to retrieve her grandson after all, but to stay and help with the establishment of the new government. She wore no glamour. Draco saw more than one nervous glance darted at her and the spots covering her skin, but if the Longbottom matriarch noticed them, she clearly did not care. She was much more interested in speaking to the people who had come to her and actually wanted to know more about half-human wizards and witches.

Hawthorn Parkinson watched Lucius with a gaze that made Draco nervous, even though her eyes were no longer amber. He was almost certain she wouldn't take revenge on him as long as that could harm the war effort. But no one had spoken about what might happen after the war.

Padma Patil stood with her head bowed, shivering, against the wall. Draco felt his mouth tighten in exasperation. It was sad that her girlfriend had died, but she was being no use to anyone here, too caught up in her mourning. It might be best for her if her parents came and took her home, as they had been asking to do.

He caught the eye of one person he didn't want to see at all: Michael Rosier-Henlin, leaning next to his twin. Michael stared at him with a hungry gaze for a moment, and then averted his face. Draco scowled. He didn't care what Harry said about the brat having changed since his burn and his awakening. He had not changed, in Draco's opinion, but simply learned to bury the things that made him objectionable. They would still come out in a time of peace.

But, as always, Draco's gaze returned to Harry: the center of it all—his center, at least—and the one person without whom they truly could not go on. He reached out and rested one hand on Harry's wrist, squeezing it.

Harry turned to look at him only briefly before continuing his conversation with his twin. But his hand turned and squeezed Draco's fingers back, lingeringly, in the way that said they would share a bed tonight with more passion and attention than Harry had been able to spare since the escape from Hogwarts.

Draco settled back, satisfied, to continue observing the antics of people more stupid or less informed than he was. That made quite a large number of the souls in the room, given the wonder of who he was.

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Chapter Fifty-Eight: A Parting of Ways

"It's *not* neutral ground."

Harry sighed and waved the letter around in front of his face. In truth, he hardly needed to cool himself off; not even the wards around Silver-Mirror could keep off some of the December chill, and the fire had sunk, since it had been some hours since he built it up. He slid off the chair to do that now, and watched as the flames blazed, and tried to tell himself that he didn't miss being able to blaze with them.

"I don't really care if it is or not," he told the fire. "Minister Gansweider agreed to meet there, and she's the trusted representative for the International Confederation of Warlocks. So we'll go to the Isle of Man, and meet with her in Paton Opalline's home, and hope that we can settle this ridiculous conflict over the International Statute."

"Harry." Draco came and dropped to his heels beside him. His voice was harsh enough that it seemed set to scrape all the enamel off Harry's teeth. "I just want you to reconsider accepting her offer. It could be a trap. She wouldn't have any good reason to be well-disposed towards you. She met with Juniper, remember? And she shares a country with Monika. Why would you do this?"

"The message from the Confederation was official," said Harry, clinging to his temper. Draco had been trying to talk him out of meeting with Minister Gansweider for the past two days, and every single time he brought up the same points, as if Harry had not thought of those himself even as he considered Gansweider's first letter. Harry hated being treated as if he were stupid when he'd done nothing to warrant it. "They endorse this. And if she attacked me in the home of my allies, I'm sure the Opallines would have something to say about that."

"You can't be sure that they'd be able to prevent injury to you in time," Draco pointed out.

Harry jerked himself to his feet and turned furious eyes on Draco, who actually blinked and seemed to realize, for the first time, that Harry was angry. And he *was*. He could feel his magic hammering like wings around his heart, snarling like a dog on a leash,

eager to be let out and attack Draco.

He was not to *that* point of losing control yet, thank Merlin, and he managed to restrain himself to a tight, “I don’t want to talk about this further, Draco. I’ve already agreed to the meeting, and I’ll be taking guards along, and I’ll have dozens more there with me. This dispute with the Confederation needs to be *settled* if at all possible. I don’t *want* to have it hanging over my head when we’re trying to fight Voldemort. And you know that some people are only holding back on supporting the Hope for Light or the Alliance of Sun and Shadow because they’re afraid, rightly, of what the international wizarding community could do to us. Settling this benefits everyone involved.”

“I worry about you,” Draco said softly.

There was a time when Harry’s guilt at the hurt in his eyes would have made him apologize at once. Now, he mostly resented the fact that Draco made him feel guilty at all, and the resentment fed the anger.

“I know that,” said Harry. “You’ve made it abundantly clear. And instead of accepting my decision or bringing up new reasons to worry, you keep making the same points again and again, as if I weren’t intelligent enough to figure them out on my own. If you can’t contribute in a *new* way to the war effort, Draco, please at least refrain from repeating things like this.”

And then he turned away, because one more moment there, and he knew he *would* attack Draco.

He didn’t want to leave the house, even in as bad a mood as he was in, because he knew that Draco would send people after him. So he opened the door that led to one of the Black wonders kept safely hidden in Silver-Mirror, the wind-pool for which the house was named. He stepped onto the balcony that led out over the pool and stared down.

It looked the same as it had the first time he saw it—almost. There was still the silver-blue-white vortex of circling wind, leading to no bottom, and the birds of varied shapes and sizes riding and diving and plunging and playing in it. But now he could see the walls of the magic that formed the pool, containing it, and shivering with a sensual awareness of air that resembled, in some ways, the alien intelligence of the Stone and the Maze.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned his head on his hands. His magic continued responding to the walls of the pool, though, and wrapped him in a cool breeze when one of the birds veered close to him, curious to see what he was.

Being near immense sources of magic soothed his own magic, when he could think of nothing else that would calm it. But Harry hadn’t missed how his restlessness continued to increase.

His magic wanted to be *doing* things again, not simply remaining in Silver-Mirror and organizing the new government, as necessary as that was.

Well, when they went to Gollrish Y Thie, it would have something to do. Harry was almost hoping that the Minister of Austria *would* try something, unlikely as that seemed and as much of an international mess as she would make. Then his magic could be used and, afterwards, lie dormant again, instead of quivering around him like wings, ready to spread every single time someone startled or irritated him.

At least they were going to travel. There was that.

Draco shut the door to the room of the wind-pool quietly. He had intended to go in and confront Harry, but judging from Harry’s slumped shoulders and the way they shook, now wasn’t the best time.

He hadn’t meant to be unproductive or obstructive by bringing up those points about the Minister, he thought resentfully as he leaned back against the wall and shut his eyes. He’d only meant to emphasize things that Harry seemed to be ignoring. Why had Harry immediately decided that *he* should be the one to attend this meeting and explain the new government to the Confederation and its representative, for example? Someone else could have gone and done it. That would leave Harry safely out of danger, show Minister Gansweider exactly how important she was in the grand scheme of things, and give honor and prestige to one of Harry’s followers who wanted it.

Merlin, Draco would have liked to do it himself.

At least the Opallines, Minister Gansweider, and Harry had all agreed on the Isle of Man as a meeting place, but Draco still didn’t think it was neutral ground. And he wondered if the Minister of Austria hadn’t intended some insult to Harry, wanting to meet in

a house that she *had* to know was built of the bones of a dead dragon. Harry wouldn't think to look for that kind of gesture, but to Draco, it was like breathing.

He would be with Harry. He could make sure that nothing happened to him.

And that has been so effective before, his conscience jibed at him.

Draco shook his head and straightened up with a frown. They were meeting Minister Gansweider on New Year's Day. That left him some time to plan, and to ask Snape to have potions on hand just in case of an accident.

Whether that accident happened to Harry or was caused by them once they saw the Minister start behaving in a threatening way—as Draco was sure would happen—Draco wanted to be prepared.

Evamaria came in to the Isle in a carriage drawn by swans. Lady Monika had insisted. She had bred the birds to be impressive, with wingspans more than twenty feet wide and beaks lined with razor-sharp teeth and webbed feet edged with cruel claws and black feathers that smelled of jasmine, and she said this would lay a mark on the minds of their enemies that just Apparating in couldn't.

Evamaria had agreed with that, but she wished she had known how long the flight from Austria to the Isle of Man was likely to be, how cold, and how lonely. It gave her too much time to think, for one thing.

Her hands clasped two treasures in her lap, representing her opposite purposes for being here. One was a ball of colored glass that would allow the International Confederation of Warlocks to listen to any words spoken during the meeting, so that they would know Evamaria and Harry were not trying to cheat them and reach some private agreement between Austria and Britain which would still contravene the International Statute. The other was an earring that she would don when the swans began their descent to the Isle. It linked her mind intimately to her Lady's, which let her know what Monika thought of the meeting and told her how to direct her words. Neither had been created with magic known in Britain, so the sense that anyone would notice and guess the purpose of the devices was slim.

Slim, but not nonexistent, and in the meantime Evamaria had to dance between the requirements of the Confederation, which mostly wanted a timeline for the war and the British wizards to stop revealing themselves to Muggles, and her Lady, who wanted to see if there was a chance she could steal Harry's magic.

Evamaria sighed and leaned back against the side of the carriage. It resembled a sled in form, silver covered with curlicues of white wood, created by the miners that Monika had bred to serve her out of rats. And the four swans that flew in front of it, pulling it along with flap after flap of their wings, were beautiful, that was certain, as long as one didn't look too closely at their beaks and feet. Such a deep black, darker than Evamaria's hair, darker even than Monika's, with some of the dusky sheen of blueberries.

She hated her divided allegiance sometimes, the struggle to do right by her country while keeping her Lady happy. And certainly the people in the International Confederation lucky enough to come from nations where Lord-level wizards didn't make their homes didn't understand her position. They seemed to think that she should defy Monika and end up a breeder if she needed to, just to support some of the Confederation's inflexible decisions.

In reality, Evamaria engaged in a delicate balancing act, and she had known from the moment she became Minister that it would probably cost her her life, unless she was lucky enough to lose the next election. It was what one *did*, a tradition in Austria since Monika had risen to full power. She should have been killed while she was still a girl, not yet in control of herself, but she had escaped the hunters too long, and then given herself to the Dark, and then it was all over.

But Evamaria would do what she had to do, make the compromises that were required, and if that made her less "pure" and "good" than some of the simpletons in the Confederation, she must live with it.

The carriage began to curve down, and she could see the sea between Britain and Ireland gleaming now, and the large house made of dragon's bones on it. Evamaria shook her head as she clipped the earring, a bright boss of pearl and silver, on. The Opalline family had apparently been revealing themselves to the Muggles on their island. The Prime Minister of the Muggle United Kingdom had so far prevented the media from reporting on the story, and the local Muggles remained convinced—most of them—that it was some huge, elaborate conspiracy or joke of a magician.

Apparently.

Evamaria thought it a bit strange that no one had questioned the Opallines beyond that, but then, she had learned long ago never to overestimate the intelligence of Muggles.

“You are almost landed,” Monika murmured into her ear. Evamaria was uncertain if she had overheard her thoughts, or was linked to the swans and so could track their movements in some uncanny way.

“Yes, my Lady,” Evamaria said, as the swans circled the dragon-house once and then sought for a landing place on the other side, on the slopes of Snaefell. Monika had assured her that they would know how to find one, that she need not guide them.

“Serve me well.”

Evamaria nodded in resignation. That was her life, truly, a study in resignation and doing the best she could.

Monika was aware of all the potentially rebellious thoughts that raced through her Minister’s head, she knew. But they didn’t matter. Monika did not have to do anything about them. She was always in control.

Evamaria set herself to endure.

Harry stared at the swans as they came down. They were beautiful creatures, and even if their eyes did, from a distance at least, blaze scarlet like Voldemort’s or like hot coals, he couldn’t help but admire them.

They were also wound with webs.

Harry bowed his head and did his best to pretend that he hadn’t noticed. Yes, he had to free all the creatures bound by webs, but he didn’t have to do it now. And trying to unbind the swans would only cause an international incident, given that the Austrian Minister would have to find another way to get home. And interfering with Monika’s magic would probably give her an excuse to strike at him.

Still, the need to unbind the webs itched and burned at him.

To pass the time and distract himself, he took one more glance around, to make sure that everyone was in the proper place. Paton and Calibrid stood with him, one on either side, since it was their home and they would be the ones who would welcome an international visitor to Gollrish Y Thie under ordinary circumstances. That made a neat excuse to keep Snape, Draco, and the others back.

He did have Connor with him, at his right shoulder. It would be a good learning experience for him, Harry thought firmly. His brother was an adult, legally, and in normal times would have been forming contacts among other Light wizards, learning how to function in the world as the heir of Lux Aeterna, and what it meant that he was of Potter heritage but a halfblood. It hadn’t happened so far, and given that Connor was more interested in ordinary life than politics, Harry could hardly blame him, but no time was like the present to learn.

He ignored the thought that he might just have wanted someone to suffer along with him.

The carriage landed on the doorstep of Gollrish Y Thie, near the dragon’s gaping jaws. Calibrid straightened a little. Harry gave her a warning glance. After he had explained the way that Monika tended to treat the people bound to her, she had been eager to contact her relatives who lived in Austria and do what she could to make the Dark Lady’s life difficult. She had backed down on the plan, especially when she found out that Monika wasn’t the one visiting them that day, but she still seemed primed to cause an incident if Harry wasn’t careful.

Paton, luckily, was the calm counterpart to his daughter, as always, and he stepped forward as Evamaria Gansweider alighted from the carriage, catching her hand and helping her over the ice-rimed stones that Harry remembered negotiating so carefully the first time he’d visited Gollrish Y Thie two years ago. He said something Harry couldn’t catch, but which made Evamaria jerk her head up and look at him.

“I had no idea that you knew German,” she murmured in English, sounding hesitant.

Paton smiled, and bowed over her hand for a moment, then finished leading her up to the doorstep before he responded. *“I traveled on the Continent for a year before I returned home,”* he said calmly. *“All the heirs of my family do so. It seemed*

imperative to learn at least some of the tongue of each country where I have relatives—and those are a formidable number, as I suspect you know.”

“Old Blood,” said Evamaria, and Harry had to change his initial impression of her. Her eyes might not be the most vibrant in the world—in fact, they were haunted with shadows of an old pain which he found disturbing—but her face could light up when she took an interest in something, as she was evidently doing now. “I had no idea that you extended it so far, from simply knowing and controlling your family to becoming involved with the lands where they lived.”

“We have many things to do with our time, since we do not make war,” said Paton, and then bowed to her. “Welcome to Gollrish Y Thie, Minister Gansweider, and our home. My name is Paton Opalline, and this is my daughter and heir, Calibrid.” Calibrid made a little curtsy, though Harry could see her eyes daring Evamaria to comment on the fact that she had no magic of her own. Evamaria chose not to comment, but then, if she were at all politically astute, she would have known that before she came. “And this is Harry Black, once Harry Potter, *vates* and adopted son of the Opalline family and Severus Snape, whom you came to see.”

Evamaria turned towards him, a motion so swift that it made the heavy earring in her right ear sway, and then came to a stop. Harry found himself studied in a way he didn’t enjoy. That gaze said this woman had dealt with powerful wizards before, and had disliked it every single time. Just by means of their power, they were to be feared, avoided when possible, placated when necessary.

With a start, Harry realized the gaze had been so deep and long that he’d passed the surface of her mind and started reading her thoughts. He lowered his eyes at the same moment as Evamaria averted her face sharply.

“My apologies, Madam,” Harry murmured. He had no idea what attitudes towards Legilimency were in Austria, but it was still a *faux pas* for one leader to make when meeting with another at a politically delicate moment. “My name is Harry, and I would prefer that you call me that to all the titles in the world.” Perhaps that would reassure her that he wasn’t like other powerful wizards, to be feared and avoided. Of course, a touch of that idea was probably helpful to a Minister—Scrimgeour had had it—but it would do no good if it crippled their interaction.

Evamaria sighed. “And yet, you meet me with an army at your back,” she said, and Harry lifted his head in time to see her gesture at his friends and family with a languid hand that nevertheless shook a little. “Is this the way to do things, Harry?” She paused as if anticipating that he would strike when she spoke his name, but relaxed and went on when he didn’t. “If you trust me, at least, and it seems as if you would like me to trust you.”

“My apologies,” Harry said, and stood straighter and made his voice cool. He wouldn’t let his desire to make her comfortable drive him into a moment of weakness that could cost Britain or the Opallines—or him—greatly. “But I thought it best, since I did not know if you came under the Confederation’s aegis or Monika’s.”

Evamaria winced; if he hadn’t known better, Harry would have sworn that her earring had stung her. But when he concentrated on it, he received no feeling of familiar magic. It seemed to have been enchanted to look pretty, and no more.

“I come under the aegis of both, always,” said Evamaria, “since I am a member of the one and live in the same country as the other. What and who do you represent, Harry? The whole of your country? Or only a small and select group of wizards, this Alliance of Sun and Shadow I have heard about?”

“The Alliance is made of my main supporters, that is true,” said Harry, as clearly as he could. He really *didn’t* want to frighten her, so he tried to make his voice truthful, neutral. “But many more have joined us, and others may join us depending on the outcome of this meeting. The whole of the country does not support me, of course. Juniper did not, and some people who are afraid of me don’t, and Voldemort and his followers are a long way away from doing it.”

Evamaria gave a bleak smile at the last statement. “Of course not,” she murmured. “But if you make a promise today, you will do your best to see that the whole of the country follows it?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “At least, if it concerns international law. I will not promise to lie down and bare my throat to your Lady if she comes hunting me. I have my people to defend and my work to do.”

Evamaria nodded slightly. “And you consider the war with Voldemort to be your most important priority?”

“No.”

Harry heard several gasps behind him. He was sure that he would see Snape scowling if he looked, probably thinking that he shouldn’t have said that. But he ignored it, and held Evamaria’s eyes, and tried to speak to her the way one Minister would speak

to another. At least, the way he thought one Minister should speak to another. Pureblood dances often did not extend across national boundaries and it was not as though Harry had spied on the Confederation's meetings.

"My first priority is making sure my country thrives," he said. "So I am rebuilding the government, and trying to get those to safety who wish to go, and trying to make an accurate tally of the dead and missing from Hogwarts. I will fight the war, yes, but I will not allow Voldemort to ravage my people in the meantime."

Evamaria gave him a wistful look. Harry wondered if she was thinking about what she would do under similar circumstances, if Monika was ravaging Austria, or if it was a simple glance of kinship between two people confronted with powerful and greedy Dark wizards.

"I can understand that," she said. "And certainly the Confederation does not wish to see Lord Riddle reach beyond these shores." She hesitated a moment, then added carefully, "Nor does my Lady's Pact."

"They don't act like it," Connor muttered.

Evamaria chose to ignore that, even if she heard it, which Harry hoped wasn't the case. "But that doesn't mean that they want to continue to expose the British wizarding world to Muggles either, Harry, and so perhaps encourage the hostility of Muggles all over the world. Perhaps you can handle relations amicably here. It will be less the case in countries where no single powerful leader like you exists, or where the Muggles may be more prone to violence."

Harry nodded. It had been what he thought Evamaria would say, and in a certain light, he could even see the sense of it. So he had thought up a compromise which was not perfect, but sounded good. *The Pact and the International Confederation of Warlocks ought to find it perfect*, he thought.

"I will ask my people to restrain their efforts in front of Muggles until the war is over," he said. "We do not need to be hunted on two fronts, by Voldemort and by British Muggles who may become horrified when they find out how far our world extends, and what we have suffered."

Evamaria cocked her head. "Do you have a good idea of when the war will be over?"

Harry met her eyes and shook his head. He thought it not beyond the realm of possibility that the Confederation had sent her with some device that could hear what they said, even though he couldn't sense any magic like that on her. And of course there were always Pensieves so that they could listen to what he'd said later. So he was not about to reveal anything concerning the Horcruxes. "It could be weeks. It could be months, or years. I certainly hope it does not take the latter period of time, but it might."

Evamaria considered for a moment. Harry could tell that she was liking the solution more and more as she thought about it. It required no great sacrifice on the part of anyone outside Britain, and it delayed the resolution of the problem for a while, during which the politicians could take a breath, not confront a Lord-level wizard, and pretend to be doing something solid.

For Harry, it would pull the Confederation off his back, insure safe travel to the Continent for those who needed it, and deprive his enemies of one weapon they might use against him. Yes, he would have to take up the problem again soon enough, but at least it was not one that he needed to deal with right *now*.

"The Confederation will like this," Evamaria said at last. "Yes, Harry, I believe that we might have found a solution." She held out her hand.

Calibrid cleared her throat.

Harry turned towards her. His heart beat wildly in his throat, but, oddly enough, his head was calm. He had thought this might be a problem from the moment he'd decided on the solution, but he had wanted to wait and see if it would. And now it seemed it would, from the way that Calibrid was looking at him.

"I think Muggles need to be a part of our world," she said. "And if we put that off, it becomes easier and easier to do so. There might never come a day when we can be as open as we've tried to be in the past few months with the Muggles on our island. And you know that our kindred all over Europe are revealing themselves to Muggles, though those countries have functional Ministries that can and do *Obliviate* most memories. We are not willing to stop, Harry. Nor will the Opallines accept a declaration that applies only to Britain."

"And neither will you," Harry said, already understanding that. "Even though you live in Britain."

Calibrid shook her head, eyes ablaze with clear light. “It’s nothing against you specifically, Harry,” she said. “But we cannot abide by this agreement, even though I understand that you have excellent reasons for making it.” She paused for a long moment, then said, very gently, “And you know that we cannot directly join in nor care for the war, since we are Old Blood and sworn to peace.”

“I know,” said Harry. The Opallines had been useful as a spy network, but the only one who had ever fought directly for him was Fergus Opalline, who had become a werewolf and so, in his family’s eyes, was driven to savagery and violence by things that weren’t his fault.

“Has the time come for a parting of ways?” There was sadness in Calibrid’s voice, but also determination.

“It seems so.” Harry held his hand out. “At least it’s an amicable one.” He waited, watching her, and then added, “At least, it’s come unless you wish to change your mind and your methods about Muggle integration into the wizarding world.”

“No. We’ve kept magic and wonder from them for too long. It’s time to let them know it still exists.” Calibrid took his hand, and held it for long moments before letting it go. “My father and I have discussed this, and he has at last come around to my way of thinking. We must withdraw ourselves from the Alliance, as we would inevitably betray you.”

Paton cleared his throat. “None of this stops you from being an adopted son of the Opalline family, Harry. Never think that. We would like to see you here from time to time, and if you need assistance from us that does not relate to concealing ourselves from Muggles, then feel free to request it.”

“I will,” Harry said quietly. “Thank you.”

“The Confederation will not be entirely satisfied with this,” Evamaria said thoughtfully. “On the other hand, I cannot say I am surprised, or that no one anticipated this outcome.” She nodded to Harry, and produced a blank scroll of parchment from her pocket. “If you will fill this with a description of our agreement, and sign it, I will sign it as well, and we can come to an end of this matter.”

“For now,” Harry said, holding her shadowed eyes and wondering if he would see them across a battlefield one day.

The Austrian Minister nodded. “For now.”

Evamaria leaned against the back of her swan-carriage as it rose into the air again, sighing. She had done relatively little, but she was exhausted in any case. Being so near a powerful wizard induced headaches in her.

“*Does that include me?*” Monika’s voice murmured in her ear, and then Evamaria heard laughter. Of course it did, and her Lady knew that.

With gratitude, Evamaria removed the earring and laid it in her lap. The swan-carriage was bound for the island in the Atlantic where the Confederation’s leaders were currently meeting, so that Evamaria could hand the scroll with the agreement directly to them and survive another interrogation. She would have a long day yet, longer still as the swans carried her back and forth across waters and lands where the sun still shone.

It didn’t matter, though. Evamaria would rather face a dozen interrogations than spend a dozen minutes in the presence of a Lord-level wizard.

They ruled too much, imposed too many choices, and did not know enough about free will. She wished for a world without them.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Resistance

“Indigena.”

She was not sure whether she had grown to hate or love the way he whispered her name, as if it were a revelation. She told herself it was simply that he had no other name to whisper, and it was either her he must converse with, or the young basilisks who had finally hatched and begun to crawl about the burrow—and if they had names, they were in Parseltongue, which Indigena had

never succeeded in understanding. She wiped the dirt off her hands and descended into the burrow, turning towards the throne room.

To her surprise, though, he wasn't there, lying on the pallet in the corner the way he usually did. Instead, Indigena found her Lord near the warm cave where the basilisks had hatched. He was scratching one of them, the one with the swaying red plume of the male, under the chin. The female lay nearby with her golden eyes firmly shielded by the false eyelids, or Indigena would not have dared to approach so close.

"My Lord?" she asked.

He turned to face her, and she could make out amusement in the sharp lines around his mouth, and the way his lips parted and the forked tongue flickered between them.

"I have found a way," he said.

It took her a moment to understand what he was talking about, and when he did, her heart beat considerably faster. A way around the wild Dark's ban, a way to attack Harry indirectly. Of course, the plan he hatched each time he lay on his pallet and shut his eyes was also a way to do that, but it would take a long time, and probably not be fruitful before the spring equinox in any case. Indigena knew her Lord's impatience to take a shorter route.

She crouched down in front of him and murmured, "Tell me."

"I have seen many things that Harry does not know I have seen." Her Lord now scratched the basilisk's chin with one hand and stroked its plume with the others, and it gave a deep, rumbling sound like a purr that Indigena had not known serpents could make. Voldemort hissed at it, and it hissed back, the sounds slipping and slurring and making Indigena shiver with an ancestral, nameless fear. "And what he goes through now is what I went through when I was young, not long after I had left Hogwarts. His magic is restless. Acting up. It needs to be fed, and Harry is not feeding it."

Indigena frowned. *That seems like a stupid thing to do.* "Are you sure he's not holding off and trying to bait you into a trap, my Lord?" she asked aloud.

"No." Voldemort laughed again, and the female basilisk hissed as if to echo him, the sound trilling up and down the scale. "In this case, he does not know the magic should be fed, and even if he knew, he would try to resist the idea. It needs blood, death, and hatred. And can you see my heir settling for such things, even if he wished to offer his power a meal?"

Indigena shook her head ruefully. Harry might have changed since the war began—the convoluted plan he'd enacted to fool the wild Dark showed that—but his morals were still not flexible enough to let him do what her Lord described. "I can't see it, my Lord."

"And neither will he," Voldemort said, voice singing and smug. "Past a certain point, a Lord's magic begins to demand food. Blood and hatred and kills are the things that feed it most effectively, though it can be fed with constant use in the name of compassion." Voldemort's voice deadened on the last word. "That is the point at which most of us Declare for Dark or Light. A Declared Lord or Lady does not need to feed the magic, because it has a connection with something greater than itself—which is really what it is hungering for, more greatness than confinement in a single body can afford it. But Harry will not Declare, and he will not kill, and he has used his magic little in the name of his—*compassion*—in the last little while, though it has increased since Hogwarts. His magic is pushing him more and more. He can control it now, but he will reach a tipping point where he must kill, Declare, or die."

"I have never heard of that, my Lord," Indigena murmured. Of course, she hadn't made a study of Lord-level wizards, but Voldemort had never mentioned it before, either, and that seemed like a confidence he would have shared with her during the ten months she cared for him.

"The lives of the powerful are mysterious and little-known to the weak." Voldemort scratched the male basilisk's chin again, then reached down and grasped its throat, nearly choking it to death before letting it go. The young serpent put his head down tamely near her Lord's feet. "But one can see it in the fading that we do, if we do not die, becoming part of the paths of Light or Dark at last. I will not suffer that fate, as I will not die."

Indigena said nothing, keeping her eyes on her hands.

"But we have a yearning, all of us, to be closer to the forces of magic in the world, and those forces call us, the Light and the Dark, attracted to the power we carry and wanting it to be part of them. The Declaration stills the yearning for a while, but at last

even that is not enough. Hence the fading.” Voldemort’s eyes burned and rolled over, balls of flame that altered with his moods. “Harry has no one to explain this yearning to him. Until recently, he was not strong enough to near the point where it would be important. But since Hogwarts...”

He let his voice trail off, but Indigena understood. Harry had swallowed magic from Voldemort, and the attempt to make his enemy weaker was now the very thing that would doom him.

“So you will lure him nearer, my Lord, and then try to push him past his tipping point?” she asked.

“Yes.” Voldemort’s hand rose and fell on the basilisk’s back in steady strokes. “I cannot drain, according to the wild Dark.” Indigena shivered with the force of the hatred in those few simple words. “I cannot act against Harry.” Pale fingers spidered across blue-black scales. “But my pets can create a situation to which he *must* come. And if he uses his *absorbere* gift, if he drains, his choices are two: Declare or begin killing to feed his magic. And either way, he may then be destroyed.”

Harry turned over, and ended up staring at the ceiling. He stifled a sigh as Draco shifted next to him. They were sleeping in the same bed again, after a few nights of not doing so because of his anger at Draco, but now Harry found himself wishing the separation could have lasted longer. His insomnia had no component of guilt when he was alone.

His magic pooled and danced under his skin, poking him with sharp sticks beneath the ribs, insisting that he be up and doing something. Harry had hoped that visiting the Opallines would do it, but that hadn’t helped. Nor had going to the cliffs above Cornwall and releasing it in random but harmless acts of power. Harry had no idea what it *wanted* at this point, and the bird hadn’t appeared to scar him and screech disapprovingly at him, either.

Harry slipped out of bed at last, and made his way down the stairs towards Silver-Mirror’s kitchen. At least he could get something to eat. Sometimes the magic quieted in the wake of food, as if it had to analyze this new presence in his body. But it often returned stronger and livelier in a short time, energized by the meal the way that swallowing magic sent his power to new heights.

Harry was willing to deal with the extra restlessness if it happened. Mostly, he just wanted a few hours of calm, restful sleep.

A light on in the kitchen, though, told him that he wasn’t the only one awake. Harry paused near the doorway and watched the bobbing *Lumos* charm, wondering if it was someone he could reveal himself to without trouble.

Then the charm came closer, and showed Snape’s face, and Harry wove the *Extabesco plene* around himself, vanishing from Snape’s every sense. The only worse person to know about this strange condition he had would be Draco.

And Snape wasn’t alone, either. Harry blinked as Regulus’s voice said from behind Snape, “Severus? Are you sure you only want a sandwich? You were brewing in your lab all day, and I hadn’t thought you came out for lunch or dinner.”

“I’m not hungry, *Mother*.”

Harry’s eyebrows climbed. Snape’s voice was vicious and mocking, not the kind of tone that Harry would have expected him to use to Regulus at all. And now he accepted the sandwich that Regulus came up and handed him with bad grace, a glare and then a turning away that was obviously meant to dismiss Regulus’s existence from his mind.

Regulus either didn’t mind or had expected this. His voice was warm, filled with tolerant humor, as he replied. “You know that I don’t love you like a mother, Severus. I *especially* don’t love you the way *your* mother did. So stop with the excuses.” He hopped up on the table and sat there the way that Harry had often seen Sirius sit on the table in the kitchen at Godric’s Hollow, swinging his legs as he ate. Harry felt a sting at his eyes, and quickly glanced away.

He heard Snape’s voice when he replied, though, his voice bleeding out as though a chunk of broken glass had stuck in his throat. “When will you believe, Regulus, that your love for me is impossible?”

“When I stop feeling it,” Regulus answered through a mouthful of crumbs. Harry heard him licking his fingers, and could just imagine the sneer on Snape’s face. “Until then, eat up, dear.”

Snape snarled. “I find that I am not hungry after all,” he announced. Harry glanced back to see him walking towards the door of the kitchen.

Regulus waved his wand lazily, and a shimmering barrier sprang up in front of Snape, stopping him. Snape folded his arms. Harry wondered if he was the only one who saw his fingers writhe into the cloth along his limbs, as if he were cold, and clutch so hard that the knuckles turned white and the fabric tore. His voice still had the sound of hatred when he replied, though, which Harry supposed was a successful attempt at self-control—better than spinning around and hexing Regulus, at any rate.

“I will thank you to let me go.”

“No, you won’t,” said Regulus, still around the mouthful of his sandwich. “You’ve never thanked anyone for anything much, even when it saved your life or your sanity.” He leaned forward, and Harry saw his eyes shining with a clear, determined light. He was not near to tears, though with the words he spoke next, Harry would not have blamed him if he were. “We mattered to each other as Death Eaters, Severus. We experienced far darker things than we have in this war. Why won’t you admit that we mean at least as much to each other now as we did then?”

“Now is *not* then,” said Snape. Harry shook his head and started to move away from the door. It didn’t seem as though they would be leaving the kitchen soon, which he had hoped would happen, and so he would go out and fling magic at the winds. Perhaps it would help. At any rate, he shouldn’t be overhearing this conversation.

“Of course it’s not,” said Regulus cheerfully. “Now we know each other much better, and we’re old enough not to make stupid decisions, and we don’t live under the domination of a murderous madman.”

“Are you *quite* sure that we both have made good decisions?”

“Well, I know *you* haven’t, very often, so I’m offering you a chance to do so.”

Harry slipped outside Silver-Mirror at last, and shut the door behind him as quietly as he could. The *Extabesco plene* prevented anyone from sensing him, but he could still create noise if he disturbed an object too loudly.

It was snowing, a punishing, driving storm that rode winds which seemed determined to knock Harry down. He cast a low-level Warming Charm, because he hoped that forcing his magic to fight the cold on a more elemental level might use some of it up, and raised his hands.

The wind dived and curtsied around him when it felt his power, dividing like skirts and then swinging back again. Harry felt himself relax, mostly because some of the energy had drained out of his muscles and into the air. He would never have Kanerva’s ease around the sky—that had come from a study of it that had lasted longer than Harry had been alive—but the air absorbed each blow he could offer it and created enough interesting pattern-effects that his magic’s attention drifted to it and stayed there.

Harry played until a shimmer in the snow caught his attention. He paused, and dropped his concealment. If this was a trick or trap or spy of Voldemort’s, it was possible that it might flee when it saw him. If it was a messenger from his allies, a lost owl perhaps, it deserved to find its way to him.

The shimmer didn’t move when he appeared, though. Harry moved forward and crouched over it. When he brushed away the snow from it, a layer of warm magic protecting his hands from both the cold and any defensive weapons the object might offer, he saw more silver.

And more, until Harry realized that he knew the color, so much like a mixture between silver and mother-of-pearl.

With a cry, he washed more of the snow away, at the same moment as warmth struck through his hands and lit a coal at each fingertip. Argutus’s curled body didn’t move at first, but then shifted a bit closer to the warmth. Harry picked him up gently, though he staggered as he did so. He could wear Argutus when the snake did his own coiling around Harry’s body, but he had forgotten how big he was, more than six feet long now.

“How did you get here?” he whispered, and cradled him closer to his chest. He had assumed Argutus dead in the fall of Hogwarts when Snape came back and reported that nothing lived under the stones. He had wanted to mourn, but there had been only small and scattered moments here and there when he could have done so. And if he began serious mourning, he wouldn’t end it in time for the next crisis.

That Argutus could have lived, and then crawled all the way across Britain to Silver-Mirror, and then survived the intense cold of the winter nights, was too incredible to believe.

Yet somehow he had done it, and he stirred now and lifted his head sluggishly to regard Harry, and hissed in weak Parseltongue, “*I knew—I knew that you were here. My scales—showed me the vision of it. I followed the vision, and I used my magic to live as*

much as I could. The vision—the magic of the vision heated me and filled my scales with warmth and light as it happened. But then the images stopped when I reached Silver-Mirror, and I could not move any longer.” He dropped his head abruptly to Harry’s shoulder, and gave a little shiver, and Harry guessed that he had gone unconscious.

His entire body blazing with heat now, Harry looped the enormous tail around his shoulder and neck like a rope, and strode towards the door of Silver-Mirror. His magic danced helpfully around him now, intent on pumping life and sunlight into Argutus. He should not have come so far, and so bravely, only to die when he was literally on the doorstep of salvation.

Argutus was going to live.

That was the first thing Harry had understood for a few hours now, as he held Argutus on the kitchen table and warm him and then retracted the warmth, again and again, trying to drive the deadly torpor out of the Omen snake’s body and not overheat him. A small temperature variation could kill a snake. And Argutus had been lying in the snow Merlin knew how long, and had slithered miles in cold before that, sustained only by his magic. From what Harry could understand of his hisses, sometimes sleepy and sometimes agitated, Argutus had very nearly depleted his own power to reach Silver-Mirror. It wasn’t natural to keep a vision shining for that long. And that meant he could have drawn on energy he badly needed to survive.

But now it was two hours later, and Argutus was lively and excitable and eating a chicken that Harry had asked for and received. He would find out later where it came from, and make some recompense to the owners. Argutus swallowed the mangled body in one gulp, and went back to talking without seeming to notice the weight of his swollen neck as it draped across the table.

“—tried to follow you, but you’d gone into the tunnels by then, and you didn’t pause to wait for me.” He lifted his head and flicked his tongue against Harry’s cheek.

“I’m sorry about that,” Harry whispered, and smoothed one hand down his back. The scales glimmered, but they were duller than usual, which made it sheer chance and good luck—and probably the fault of the nearly full moon—that Harry had seen him shining in the snow. Harry suspected it would be a long time before they shone like illuminated milk again.

“You had other things to think about, but it would have been nice to come back for me.” Argutus flicked his tail. *“Now, stones shook and fell, and much dirt shook down on top of me, but was I one to complain? Not me! I burrowed deeper, and slid along in the dirt with only my head above it.”*

Harry frowned, and then felt a hand clasp his shoulder. He reached back and squeezed Draco’s wrist without taking his eyes from Argutus. *“How could you do that? I didn’t know it was an ability of Omen snakes.”*

Argutus gave him a lofty look. *“Not the lazy ones who slither around in the woods and only ever think about mating and food, food and mating, all the year long. I learned from the runes that Draco did. The rune circles he made?”* he added, when Harry just stared at him blankly. *“He always made one of them wrong for the effect he wanted. But he could not have known that the rune would be useful when a snake danced it, forming it with his body. Or at least me. I am the cleverest snake I know, after all, and the most magical.”*

Harry reached out a hand to slowly stroke Argutus’s spine, his fingers shaking slightly. The Ministry had put few restrictions on the sale and breeding of Omen snakes, since they weren’t poisonous and were considered “Light” creatures. They would surely have tightened down those laws if they had known the snakes were actually capable of learning magic.

“That’s wonderful, Argutus,” he whispered. *“You are a clever snake. I’ve never known one like you.”*

Argutus flicked his tongue out and wriggled his body at the same time, which showed he was intensely happy. *“So I hid in the dirt until the tunnels stopped shaking, and then I left the tunnels. But the cold slowed me down, and I had to sleep for a while. In the meantime, it seems that someone—“* he tilted his head to look at Snape with a superior flick that made the chicken bob *“—examined the ruins and declared that I was dead. And then you left. It wasn’t until I woke and saw the vision that I knew where I had to go.*

“And then, what an adventure! I crawled across the whole of England—“

“Not quite,” Harry managed to murmur. He knew Argutus was clever and wonderful, but he didn’t want him to get a head as big as his neck.

Argutus gave him a wounded look. *“Across most of it,”* he said huffily. *“And I was chased by dogs, and cats, and I got snowed*

on, and rained on, and I had to catch horrible-tasting things to eat. And Muggles hit me with brooms or tried to shoot me with things that went past me very fast. Except for one who tried to pick me up with a stick and take me somewhere. I don't know what he wanted, but he was an idiot if he thought I would coil around the stick. It would have broken under my weight, and all the food he had was dead."

"You don't mind sausages and cornflakes and other things that aren't alive," Harry murmured. He didn't try to define what he was feeling as he scratched with magically heated fingers in between Argutus's scales. All he knew was that he felt better than he had since the fall of Hogwarts.

"They are at least hot."

"Not cornflakes."

"You must bring down the aftermath of my tale of heroism and courage." Argutus flicked his tail again. "All I know is that if I were allowed to coil under the Sorting Hat, I deserved to be made a Gryffindor. And now I have come back to my human friend who doesn't even appreciate me."

Harry laughed at that, and bent down to put his face next to Argutus's snout. "I do so appreciate you."

Apparently, he put enough emotion in the hisses, or used just the right wording. Argutus cocked his head for a moment, then said, *"Oh. That's all right, then."* Then he flopped limply across Harry's arm. *"Carry me to bed. I'm tired. And don't bring Draco with you if you're just going to smell hostile at each other. I need a peaceful sleep. Brave adventurers always have a peaceful sleep."*

Harry carefully arranged Argutus around his neck and shoulders and arms, then turned to face Draco. Draco had a complex expression on his face as he watched him. Harry knew there were other people in the kitchen—Snape and Regulus, for one thing, because Snape seemed to relish the opportunity to be in public where Regulus wouldn't talk to him, and Regulus had no intention of leaving—and he wished there was some way he could speak in Parseltongue and have Draco understand him. He didn't want to bring up their private difficulties in front of everyone.

Then he realized that he might not have to.

"Come with me?" he murmured, his fingers locking around Draco's wrist. He tugged him gently in the direction of the stairs.

Someone whistled. Harry flushed brilliantly, but kept his eyes trained on Draco's, wanting to see what he would say. He might be angry about what had happened over the past few days, and refuse the invitation. He might be angry about Harry going outside Silver-Mirror into the cold and the wind alone. He might be angry about any number of things.

At least, though, Draco was interested enough to take his hand and nod.

Draco knew how silly it was to be jealous of a snake—especially a snake that he himself had bought for Harry in the hopes that it would cheer him up—but he was. He hadn't been able to get Harry to smile in days, and Argutus came crawling in, Merlin knew how, and managed it in a few minutes.

But at least Harry seemed willing to talk, and led him straight to their bedroom, and warded the door with locking and silencing spells. Then he put Argutus gently down on the bed and sat beside him, one hand resting on a coil, but his eyes resting on Draco.

Draco stared neutrally back. He wanted to fold his arms, but Harry would probably see that as hostile body language and take it badly.

"Listen," said Harry, calmly. "I snapped at you because I was angry and restless, and I truly didn't believe there was any danger from Minister Gansweider. And, lo and behold, there wasn't."

Draco blinked. "That's your version of reconciling?" he demanded.

"Why, yes." Harry raised his eyebrows in an absolutely infuriating way. "Why wouldn't it be? I'm explaining why I was angry at you, why I snapped. And I am sorry for it. But I won't fling myself down at your feet and beg for forgiveness the way I would have, once. We're past that point."

"I never asked you to grovel," Draco argued.

Harry snorted.

“I never did.” Draco frowned at him. “I just wanted some acknowledgment, sometimes, and for you to admit that you were wrong.”

Harry’s eyes had an odd shine to them, one Draco had noticed over the past few days. At first he had thought it was repressed tears, but given that Harry had seemed enraged then, and was calm now, he’d been forced to discard the theory. Harry raised a hand to him now, and closed his eyes, and sat in silence. Though he fumed, Draco waited.

“Something odd is happening with my magic,” Harry said at last, opening his eyes again. “I’m constantly restless, and I want to— to do something, to attack something. Using it helps, but of course I can’t use it continuously, and that means it builds up again. The day I got angry at you, I almost attacked you with my magic.”

“And you didn’t think to mention this?” Draco drawled.

“Oh, yes, because you’ve always told me why you were angry with me immediately, and explained yourself reasonably,” Harry snapped back. “The problem is, Draco, I have no idea what’s happening. No idea at all. I’ve swallowed magic before. I shouldn’t be experiencing these same symptoms now when I never did before. And I shouldn’t still feel—well, still feel like I want to join the wild Dark.”

“You could have *asked* someone,” Draco pointed out.

“Who?”

“Jing-Xi—“

He cut himself off at the complicated, bitter expression on Harry’s face. “The Pact has forbidden us to communicate,” said Harry. “By any means—owl, or Floo connection, or message spells. They’re afraid that she’ll offer me some advice she shouldn’t. They have people watching to make sure we don’t try to speak to each other.”

“Someone else must know,” Draco said. “You can use the Black library. Look it up. Tell someone what’s bothering you.” It frustrated him that, even after all this time, Harry’s first impulse when something bad started happening was to keep silent.

“I would have had to explain what I was looking for,” Harry said. “I wanted your help, but I was also too angry at you to talk to you about it before tonight.”

“*That’s* counterproductive to the war effort.”

“Yes, so I’ve seen now.” Harry glared at him. “The difference is, I did apologize and admit that I was wrong. Are you going to do the same now, Draco, or is this doomed to be one-sided?”

Draco sniffed. He still didn’t think he’d been in the wrong, and he didn’t fancy apologizing. But now that he’d brought up the war effort, he wasn’t that justified in clinging to his anger. He would become the one, then, inadvertently sabotaging the war effort by distracting Harry’s attention and upsetting his emotional balance. So he gave a short nod.

“Not everything about this is resolved,” he said, when Harry closed his eyes in relief.

“Of course. I know that.” Harry gave him a not-quite-smile. “Now that we’re, hopefully, more like adults, we know that we can argue and not have it destroy us completely.” He scratched Argutus one more time, and then froze, staring at him. Draco leaned forward, wondering if an Omen snake could possibly die of cold after a few hours. But Harry seemed to be staring at Argutus’s scales, and not the snake himself. Leaning closer still, Draco saw a glimpse of light and color moving on them.

Argutus gave what sounded like a hiss of pain. Harry hissed back, and put his arms around him.

“What is it?” Draco demanded.

Harry replied in Parseltongue. Draco rolled his eyes, strode forward, and grabbed Harry’s chin, jerking it up. “In English, please.”

“Argutus damaged his ability to show visions when he was trying to survive the cold,” Harry replied, sounding bewildered. “I didn’t think he could show omens right now at all. And I can’t tell what’s happening.” He pointed to what looked, to Draco, like a

bunch of swarming small shapes with two blue-black threads pouring through them. “I don’t—“

And then he went still, and closed his eyes, and raised a hand to his forehead. Draco saw a few drops of blood leaking out of his scar before Harry covered it with his hand.

Draco wrenched the hand away. “I thought Voldemort couldn’t attack you until the equinox.”

“Not—attack.” Harry still sounded in pain as he whispered. “But he can open the connection between us and leave it like that. It’s not an attack. He’s—ah—inviting me into his mind—“

Abruptly, Harry’s eyes flared open. “Basilisks,” he whispered. “He’s using basilisks at Copley-by-the-Sea.”

He tried to jerk away from Draco, but Draco still held him fiercely, forcing his voice to be sane and rational. “Are you sure that’s what he’s doing, Harry? Does he even know where the safehouse is? He—“

“That’s where the flesh-eating rain fell,” Harry said desperately, pulling against his hands. “And he would have known all about the location of the Black houses from when the Blacks were loyal to him. It’s not hard for him to guess that I’d use the Black houses as safehouses.”

“We can’t go dashing off,” Draco tried to reason.

“I have to do *something!*”

And a silver mist sprang up from Harry’s skin and whirled around him, and Draco felt the house start to shake with the force of accumulated magic, and suspected that it was not going to be as easy to hold Harry back this time.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty: The Spiral Dance

Harry had never felt anything like this before. His magic clamped around his limbs and clothes like the mouths of a thousand small, eager puppies. He tried to stand against the pull, but it spilled him towards the door like a stream bearing a pebble. The magic was excited at the thought of battle with Voldemort, or at least with the basilisks he’d sent. It would chop them into small ruinous pieces, and drain the magic that sustained them. It had no responsibility to them in the way that Harry had to other magical creatures because he was *vates*. They were bred by Voldemort, tools and creations of the enemy.

Harry snapped out of his daze when he heard that. *No*, he thought firmly. *Just because they were made to be one way doesn’t mean that I have the right to hurt and kill them.*

His magic wasn’t listening. The walls whirled apart. Harry didn’t know if that were really happening in the wake of magic like a wind or if he simply saw it that way from the amount of motion he’d been forced into. He *did* know that he didn’t have nearly as much control as he wanted.

Around and around and around and around; higher and higher and higher and higher. Harry couldn’t catch his breath, and the cold invaded his lungs and scarred them, though not as much as the laughter of his magic seemed set to scar his brain.

Was this what it was like to be a Dark Lord? Half out of control all the time, listening to one’s magic howling its eagerness to tear the world apart? Of course, Voldemort’s magic seemed to obey him better than this, but Harry had to wonder if that came from the viciousness of Voldemort’s personality. He and his power acted in concert, so there was no need for his magic to struggle against him.

Harry would have been better able to fight the pull if he didn’t think it so tempting. The air above him bulged and swayed, and he could hear the music of the Light and Dark running beyond it, sounds like streams of hoofbeats from galloping golden and dark green horses. He could join them, and no one would blame him, not when they saw the way his magic was reacting. Didn’t he want to join them, to Declare and resign control of his life to a greater force?

No.

The magic paused around him as if surprised by his answer, and Harry seized control of himself again with a gasping lunge. Suddenly he hung suspended in midair because he wanted to, and the magic bucked and danced beneath him like a wild horse barely bridled, but still with the bit in its mouth and the reins around its ears.

Harry clutched at the reins, suspecting he wouldn't get a second chance to take them back if the magic broke free this time. And he knew he couldn't go back or down, not right now. The magic was set on going to the safehouse at Copley-by-the-Sea, and so they were going there.

But what they did when they got there—

Well, that might be more on Harry's terms than the magic's own.

The force beneath him shifted and tried slyly to buck him off. Harry gripped the reins tighter, and turned grimly towards the Cornwall coast.

He understood that, when they arrived, he would have to find some way to use his magic. What that would be, he didn't know yet.

Argutus lashed all over the bed, hissing words that were incomprehensible to Draco. He was more concerned with the fact that Harry had risen, hung for a moment in a gap between roof and sky filled with blinding, swirling silver light, and then simply vanished. He shivered and ran his hands up and down his arms, then snapped out of the trance and turned towards the door of their bedroom, flicking his wand to remove the spells locking it. He needed to tell Snape that Harry had gone.

Snape burst in the moment the door was opened, though, so Draco supposed he already knew. "Where is he?" he demanded, spittle flying from his lips.

Draco pointed towards the shadows dancing in Argutus's scales. "He said that the vision in his snake's skin showed an attack on the safehouse at Copley-by-the-Sea," he said. "Voldemort. With basilisks. And his magic has been acting up, trying to resist his control. I think it's carried him there, and he'll probably need to fight the basilisks and Voldemort to get it back under control again."

Harry had, for a moment, amid those whirling silver blades of wind and light, looked alien, more like a Lord than Draco's partner. Draco hoped that he never looked like that again. He liked power, as any self-respecting Dark wizard did, and he liked being near Harry's magic, but not when it was trying to remove him from the mortal wizarding world altogether.

"We must go at once to the safehouse," said Snape, without blinking, and turned to go down the stairs. Draco followed.

He staggered as a weight took up residence on his shoulders, though. Argutus had flung himself at Draco. Draco fell to one knee, and that gave the Omen snake time to slither up to his shoulder and wind a coil around his neck, so tightly that Draco's lungs labored for a moment in instinctive fear.

"He seems intent on going along, sir," he said, when he could look up and see Snape watching him.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "As you must," he said, and charged down the stairs once again. Draco had to use the banister to follow, given the way that Argutus's weight unbalanced him. He wondered how Harry bore carrying him.

He set his mind on that as a question that he would ask Harry when this was all over. He *would* be able to ask it, because they *would* both survive this. Draco was determined on that.

Harry didn't know how to describe the journey he and his magic took across Britain to Copley-by-the-Sea. He could have spoken intelligently about the stars they passed, drifting and flickering like meteors, and perhaps he could have counted them if he'd dropped the memory into a Pensieve. But he couldn't describe, not for certain, the way the sky turned black and red like dried magma on a bed of fresh, hot lava and then peeled away, revealing more flesh-colored sky beneath it, or the way that his horse kicked and stamped and at once tried to buck him off and keep him on so that it could be smug about its rider.

He might have passed through the paths of Light and Dark. He didn't know. He did know that the wind in his ears, the force that kept his heart beating through regions of immense pressure, the cold that bit the base of his skull even as his body overheated elsewhere, was all magic.

And when he came out of the magic and had to assert control over it, then a battle would begin.

Harry was not at all sure that it was a battle he would win.

The pressure that had built under his skin made perfect sense now, perhaps because it wasn't under his skin any more. It stormed around him, eagerness to do something and will to do it and longing to change the face of the world. Confined in a body whose limbs moved to Harry's will instead of its own, of course it had wanted to burst free. And now it had, but it still centered on him, and made him the one who would drown in its whirlpool, the one who rode its back. If it hurt someone else, or escaped from his control altogether and ravaged the country like a wild thing, it would be Harry's fault.

Harry took a deep breath, and winced as flying shards of ice stung blood out of his mouth. He would have to get used to that, remember it, and absorb it. He had absorbed enough other responsibilities, hadn't he? He could take on this additional burden.

Except that he didn't want to. The grief and the hopelessness, mingled with the fact that he had to be endlessly patient with other grieving, hopeless people, had built up to the point where he just wanted it to *end*. Not, perhaps, in death. He was amenable to being talked out of suicide. But if he could have made someone else into the person people trusted to solve their problems, he would have. And flying into his magic, escaping into the clouds and the winds and the paths, sounded so *good*. He would no longer care about what his magic had done when he lost his mind and his conscience and went flying in the midst of pure awareness, would he?

He knew that would be evil. He knew it objectively. But it seemed that good earned him nothing, either—not an end to the burdens he had to carry and the miseries he caused or exacerbated or had to heal, nor a glimpse of joy. The joy he had was provisional, in the future. He always had to deal with suffering now, and most of the people who could contribute help were reluctant to do so, still dwelling in the middle of principles that didn't want them to help certain wizards or certain magical species.

He was just tired of being the one who had to persuade *everyone*.

And he knew that wasn't true, that other people had helped him, and so he couldn't even experience frustration and resentment unalloyed. He had to remember he was being selfish at the same time, and that bred more frustration and resentment, and that added to the magic swirling around him. Other people could whinge and be selfish and then get back to the business of working with and for others. But a moment of selfishness on his part would have consequences too catastrophic for Harry to indulge in it.

But it was that very lack of selfishness that made his magic lunge free of him and cause more trouble.

Harry saw the whole cycle with clear eyes, now. No matter what he did, it led to more wrongness. And an attempt to withdraw his magic from the world and end the cycle would lead to more wrongness still.

There was nothing he could do that wasn't morally corrupt. And there might be nothing he could do against Voldemort when they arrived at Cobby-by-the-Sea and had to fight the basilisks, either.

Harry thought, and thought, and thought. The emotions were pinned under glass, now, and he gave more attention to them than to the shifting and bucking of his magic. His power was content to wait until they arrived at the safehouse, in fact. It would fight him there, in a place where the stakes were greater.

So. If helping other people was too unselfish and not helping them was too selfish, then he hung between two morally corrupt alternatives, and he could not satisfy everyone no matter what he did.

Very well. Then I can make the choice I want to make, and live with the people yelling at me. Just because I anger someone doesn't mean I need to mourn it for the rest of my life.

Harry chose.

Draco arrived with a stagger at the edge of Cobby-by-the-Sea's wards. Regulus had come with them, and in fact had Side-Along Apparated Draco, since Argutus's weight made it uncertain that Draco would arrive in one piece when Apparating on his own, and the Omen snake refused to be let go or left behind. Draco looked up, blinking, and then stared.

Glittering cascades of magic hung around the house, the remains of broken wards. The few visible windows were broken. Large holes in the earth showed how the basilisks had avoided the wards. Draco grimaced. *They dug up from beneath.*

"Where are they?" he whispered.

“And where’s Harry?” Regulus added, sounding suspicious and relieved at the same time, as if he thought that they could do something since they’d arrived at the safehouse before Harry had. *Unlikely*, Draco thought. Harry had departed in the middle of a blaze of magic, and he was the Black legal heir. He had nearly as much power over the houses as Regulus did. If he wanted to turn the broken wards against them, Regulus would be the only one who could resist.

Draco wouldn’t say that he was *afraid* of Harry, exactly, even now, but he had seen him rise, and he had felt the magic dancing around him, a winter storm with hatred in its teeth. He wouldn’t want to face him alone, either, or to anger him when he was in this mood.

“We should search inside the house,” Snape stated, drawing his wand. “We can see little from here, as most of Cogley-by-the-Sea is underground. The survivors may have fled into some distant corner.”

Draco relaxed at the reminder of how much of the house was buried under the cliffs. Then he looked at the two large holes, and thought of basilisks traveling through cracks in the stones, and shivered.

Then the night around them turned to obsidian streaked with diamond.

Draco lifted his head. A small shape was visible high overhead, looking like a Gloryflower horse, but carved of jet rather than silver, and without wings. It whirled twice, and then bore down on the house like a diving hawk.

At the same moment, someone moved on the edge of his peripheral vision. Draco whirled around, and then stumbled as Argutus suddenly left his shoulders in a wave of silver and white, making directly for Indigena Yaxley.

Indigena had not known that the basilisks would be so wasteful of their prey. From what she knew of the snakes, they slew and then ate, or at least circled back on their prey when the killing was done and ate.

But it seemed that her Lord had commanded his pets to simply kill, without thought of what came after. They had swarmed up beneath the wards, which they broke with rams of their snouts, and collars of magic that her Lord had created and bound about their necks. And they crawled around the safehouse staring in through the windows, killing or petrifying everyone they could, until their victims retreated into the cliffs and they had to find some way through the rock.

Indigena’s vines had been vital for that, which was one reason that her Lord had sent her along. The snakes might be powerful, but even they would find it difficult to burrow through solid rock, unless something went along in front of them and broke up the stone. So her plants dived, and found small cracks, and widened them into larger cracks, and then the wham of the basilisks’ noses and tails made them into holes that, hopefully, would take them into the heart of the cliffs.

Indigena had known that Harry would arrive soon, since her Lord had crafted this attack to draw him. She had even though that other people might come along with him. But she hadn’t expected to be attacked by an Omen snake.

She jumped away, first, but found that the damn snake was too quick, lunging after her and wrapping itself around her body. Then the muscles clamped down and began to squeeze, which made Indigena lose her breath. A moment later, she was annoyed. Thanks to the springy plants under the surface of her skin, even a serpent as powerful as an Omen snake couldn’t simply bear down and break her, but it was uncomfortable, and some of the more delicate leaves would probably crumple and cast odd shadows.

She tried to take the thorns out of the sheaths on her back, only to find that the Omen snake had already bound them. The moment the sheaths grew thicker in one place, in fact, prefatory to the thorns bursting out, the snake’s coils tightened exactly there, and Indigena heard her bones creak in warning.

She moved her left hand. If possible, she would sting him through the scales with her thorny rose. The scales themselves were much less thick than the wrinkled blue-purple hide that covered the basilisks, smooth and soft and nearly opalescent. She should be able to cut them apart or slide beneath one.

And then a silvery shape took form around her, and attracted still more of her attention away from either Harry soaring through the sky or the snakes tunneling through the earth.

The shade of Aurora Whitestag wrapped around her hand and held it still, her face shut and obstinate. Indigena tried to pull away; the ghost’s chill was making her skin tingle and then shut down with frostbite, the cold heavy as sleep. But Aurora wouldn’t let

go, and the snake was clamping down, now, with terrible relentlessness. Indigena found it increasingly hard to breathe.

She closed her eyes, sank her toes into the earth, and sent her roots worming down. Stone listened to her less than soil and the green tendrils of her darlings did, but it was still more her weapon than it would be the natural habitat of a ghost or a snake.

A moment later, she dropped straight down a tunnel that opened beneath her, and then wrapped the stone more and more tightly around her. The Omen snake would have to let go soon, or be crushed between her skin and the rock.

To Indigena's dismay, the change in scenery didn't seem to have discouraged Aurora, who projected from the tunnel wall like some strange gargoyle and went right on squeezing her wrist.

Harry knew what he needed to do. His senses warned him of Draco and Snape and Regulus nearby, and even a presence that felt like Argutus, but he had made the decision to be unselfish. That meant that he needed to focus on the people most in danger right now, and that meant the men and women darting through the safehouse in search of refuge from the basilisks.

The black horse dissolved beneath him. He dropped straight through a roaring gulf of wind, which still turned red and black and peeled away on either side of him, burning flakes that drifted past his shoulders and set his hair on fire. Ice answered from within his body, and clouds of steam rose around him. Harry wondered idly if anyone could see him from the ground below.

He sent a cord of magic out before him, binding the roof of Copley-by-the-Sea and ordering it to turn from solid stone that would break his plunge by killing him into a kind of syrupy mixture that would do credit to pancake batter. A moment later, he floated waist-deep in it, and then he took a deep breath and sank down through it, his magic dancing around him, changing the mixture moment by moment back into stone, so that it wouldn't destroy the integrity of the house.

Harry smiled a bit. He had counted on the need to perform multiple tasks at once to keep his magic from turning on him, and it seemed that it had worked.

But it wouldn't work forever, and that meant he needed to find the basilisks. He dropped lightly to his knees on a staircase inside the house and began to speak in Parseltongue, calling the basilisks to come to him. They were unlikely to obey, of course, since Voldemort and not Harry had bred them, but they might come in outrage at being called.

Shadows stirred at the bottom of the staircase, and Harry saw a shine of scarlet from the plume and blue-black from the scales just in time to shut his eyes. It would probably come around the corner and seek to kill him with a gaze, rather than shielding its eyes with false lids.

An outraged hiss came from the foot of the stairs—it was cursing him in Parseltongue—and then the steps shook as the immense serpent began to ascend them. Harry could feel it coming, could almost hear the poison dripping from its fangs, smell its cold dusty breath, and sense its eagerness to kill him.

Harry opened his eyes then, but kept his head bowed, so that he wouldn't die or freeze. His gaze was focused on the surging coils, relentless as the waves of the sea, and he searched for a particular glimmer—

There, like diamond patterns of sunlight on the surface of water, low on the basilisk's side. There was the edge of the web that Voldemort had woven as extra insurance to keep his serpents bound to him.

Harry grabbed it and ripped it free.

And then the world around him churned and vanished into a cascade of fire, with his magic running beside him in the shape of a red horse and snorting in startlement. Always before, Harry had been prepared when he unwound a web, at least to the point of knowing its general shape and what he should do to unbind it. This time, he had no clue, and that concentrated the magic's attention wonderfully.

Harry knew he stood a good chance of falling from the high-wire he was trying to walk. But the virtue of this complicated dance, where he had to split his attention between cutting the web, defending himself from the basilisk's physical attacks, and saving the people in the house, was that his magic *had* to use itself fully, and couldn't spare time for mischievous rebellions.

The red horse running beside him turned its head at that thought, as if trying to appreciate his cleverness but not finding the wherewithal to do it.

And then a broken world of images grabbed Harry fully.

He ran up a sheer cliff of white light, flowing with silver sparks from a waterfall of fire. That was the steepest part of the web, and Harry took it apart all around him, destroying the cliff just beneath his feet, loosening strand after strand that confined the basilisk's intelligence and made him think it imperative to listen to some strange little creature with two legs and a heavy accent.

Harry rolled to the side as fangs struck the step where he'd stood. Then he jumped, the magic granting his body enough lightness to do so, and landed on the ridge of one shifting coil. He ducked his head and closed his eyes as the swaying head, fangs bared, deadly gaze open, barely passed over him.

The rest of his magic, the part that had been most intent on getting free from his control, ran through the halls of Copley-by-the-Sea and gathered up those it could find who weren't lying still or dying helplessly from the basilisk's poison. It shoved them into rooms and barricaded the doors, and strengthened the floors enough that a snake would hurt her snout before she could batter them open, and give it up as a bad job. It made itself into the black horse that Harry had ridden to Cornwall, and raced off to find the female basilisk.

The waterfall broke, but Harry grabbed hold of a gleaming silver rope and swung into a new corner of the web, a clear angle ashine with its own stickiness. He cut it apart with the swung of a sword, and the ground roared and dropped him into an abyss bright with white dots, like a black tablecloth sprinkled with salt.

He grabbed hold hard of one coil, and tucked himself into the folds of the king snake's body. Just in time; the basilisk had begun to roll, in the same maneuver that had crushed Syllarana to death in the Chamber of Secrets. Scales pressed hard on Harry and then released him as he came upright again, but he had hidden so close that they had hit the floor instead of him. The basilisk realized what he had done and hissed in frustration, head turning again, and Harry decided that it was time for a different tactic.

It had found her. The magic flirted its tail and then showed its heels to the female basilisk as she came after it. She was tired of not eating the humans she had killed, and hoped that a meal of horse would make the difference for her waning strength.

Harry caught himself in the middle of the abyss, and demanded that there be light. A harsh glare around him showed him that he was in the knot in the center of the web, a clustered clot of jelly that could not be sliced through as he'd cut the other corner. Harry prodded it thoughtfully for a moment, and then opened his *absorbere* gift and swallowed the knot, foul magic and compulsion and all, in a huge gulp.

Harry closed his eyes to avoid the killing gaze and jumped, pushing hard with his feet against the dancing body. He rose, and rose, and rose, and luckily the magic was keeping track and didn't carry him past his target, the basilisk's snout. He grabbed it, and then turned around, and then he was riding in front of the snake's eyes, blinding it with his body.

The black horse cantered down a hallway, saw a staircase ahead, and *leaped*, helped by a surge of power that meant its host had swallowed some new magic. It landed with a skid and a clatter of hooves, and then turned another corner. The female basilisk had to take the stairs, and showed her displeasure in a series of hisses that made the corridor come alive with gravelly echoes.

Harry caught a corner of the black knot as it disintegrated, and swung out into light again, a sliding golden world between twin ridges of diamond. He would hit something if he kept swinging, so he took his own power on trust and plunged once again into freefall. This time, he created a series of iron teeth that spread out from him, chewing at both gold and white, trying to separate every single strand of the web from every other.

Harry felt the jaws opening beneath him, and knew that his dangling legs were dangerously close to the great fangs. He forced both strength and grace into his muscles and sprang backwards, over the basilisk's head and onto its neck, just behind the head. The red plume rose above him like a giant fern, and the male basilisk went mad, rubbing himself against the walls, trying to get him off.

The horse knew it had almost reached its destination, and thrilled to the thought, even as it thrilled to the magic running through it like blood. Splitting itself this many ways, doing so many different things at once, pushed it to the limit, and that had been all it wanted, really—to do great things. Teeth snapped just behind its tail, and it squealed and jumped, flinging itself through midair, blurring to a shadow as it moved, knowing exactly where it was going.

Harry knew the web had mostly broken, but one piece of it still remained: the knot that held the basilisk most in thrall to Voldemort, the one that made it recognize him as parent. Harry hovered in front of it, this dense black ball with all the weight of lead, and waited.

He rolled upside down now, so that he was clutching the underside of the basilisk's throat. Drops of poison scattered past him,

and the king serpent opened and closed his mouth again and again. Then he turned his head, alerted by the vibrations in the stones of the approach of his mate.

The black horse passed out of existence, and slammed back into its host, giving him a jolt of strength.

Harry struck with all his power and annihilated the knot in the basilisk's mind that made it think Voldemort was its master, disintegrating the web. He rode the falling pieces back into his own consciousness.

Harry twisted out of the way just as the basilisk gave a confused little hiss, free and not knowing what to do with it. Then, eyes still closed, he flung himself at the female basilisk, all three parts united now, and ate her web, ripping it free from her body and mind in one complicated maneuver.

The magic strained wildly to take in the new food and keep from being killed by the golden eyes of the monster it faced and keep its master upright. And then he slid down the female's neck to the ground, and the magic flipped itself exultantly through Harry. It was content to be under control, as long as Harry would keep doing things like this to keep it occupied.

Harry turned and faced the confused basilisks, who had their necks entwined and were swaying back and forth as they tried to figure out what to do. He hissed soothingly in Parseltongue, "I know something you can do."

Indigena hated intelligent snakes. She hated the way that a basilisk could make her feel like prey with a look, and she hated the way that this Omen snake managed to unbind himself and drop to the bottom of the tunnel the moment that she began to truly crush him.

Indigena tried to close the tunnel beneath her, then, and trap and crush him there, but he still didn't give her the chance. Instead, he swarmed up and past her face, using her head as a stepping stone out of the earth.

She swore, and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, Aurora still projected from the side of the tunnel, but had let go of her hand.

"What's the matter?" Indigena asked her, because she was tired of so much. "Changed your mind about killing me?"

Aurora cocked her head. "You still place too much importance on yourself," she answered. "I died thinking of ways to stop you. I didn't die thinking of ways that I could kill you."

And she faded into the rock, which left Indigena to climb out of it on her own.

When she reached the ground, she found three wands leveled at her, and no sign of the immense storm that her Lord had said would signal Harry losing control of his magic. She sighed. Another plan gone wrong.

She saw the traitor Snape's wand rising higher, and the dark look in his eyes. He wouldn't care about Harry's morals, but kill her out of hand. In a way, Indigena approved. It was the only way to get rid of those who had chosen to commit their lives to a mortal enemy.

But she couldn't have that, so she opened flowers along her skin and breathed out a drifting cloud of perfume. For one moment, her enemies' faces went slack, and their wands trembled and tumbled down.

Indigena seized the moment to Apparate. Let no one accuse her of wasting time, at least when she wasn't trying to hold back from torturing someone.

She arrived at the burrow prepared to tell her Lord that his plan had failed—she would have remained where she was and sent a message through the Dark Mark if it had succeeded—only to find that he already knew. From his raging, Indigena managed to pick out that he had lost control of his basilisks, and Harry had exercised his magic unbinding the webs.

Indigena took a seat in a corner, and nursed her aches and bruises, and wondered if her death was near.

Harry sighed as he watched the basilisks swim away. With a little persuasion, he had managed to make them understand that they couldn't stay in England; people would hunt them. And their gazes would only cause them trouble, because they would likewise

be hunted, and cause deaths that would bring magical creatures as well as people down on them. So they'd agreed, at least, to let him transform their eyes into less deadly objects. They could still petrify, but not do murder, with them.

Harry had advised them to find an uninhabited island where they could hunt and live alone, so that they wouldn't have to contend with wizards trying to kill them for scales or ordinary Muggles shooting them from fear. They had agreed with only a few weak arguments about being free to hunt wherever they wanted. They knew, because Harry had told them so, that they might be the only living basilisks in the world right now, and that, for various reasons, not least because his allies would never tolerate it, they couldn't stay with him.

So they slid into the sea off the cliffs, long bodies ducking easily in and out of the brine, their hisses filtering up to him in a crooning song of celebration and mourning. Harry watched them until he saw their scales become indistinguishable from flakes of foam on the waves, and then turned away with a sigh.

Draco, Regulus, and Snape were pounding around the side of the house. Snape and Regulus paused when they saw him, but Draco kept coming, and so did Argutus, who'd flowed around the corner just behind them. Harry accepted the hug around his middle from arms and then around his legs from an Omen snake who seemed determined to make him fall over altogether.

"I hate that you did that," Draco whispered into his ear.

Harry rolled his eyes. *I suppose an "I'm so glad you're all right" is too much work for him.*

But he managed to say simply, "I know you did," and then dip a shoulder to accept Argutus's weight as he climbed his body. "My magic is back under control now," he added.

Draco pulled back, blinking at him. "How did you do that? From what I saw when you were rising, I would have said no one could control it."

"I broke the webs on the basilisks."

Now Draco paled. "And let them go free to—"

"I told them to swim the sea and find an island," Harry pointed out. "After I changed their eyes so that they couldn't kill anyone with a look anymore. And the work of breaking the webs at the same time as I preserved the lives of the people still alive in Cobby-by-the-Sea was what my magic needed to calm down. Now it thinks I'll offer it plenty of excitement, so it'll stay with me." He smiled a bit. "I think Voldemort was counting on me to either Declare or self-destruct. He didn't count on the fact that the magic of a *vates* might well find the work of unbinding webs to be the most exhilarating of all."

"I was *worried* about you," Draco said.

Harry sighed. *I wanted to ignore it, but if I don't stop it, it'll go on and on.*

"Draco," he said, taking him by the shoulders and staring into his eyes. "I know that. I *understand* that. I know you hate it when I fly away without telling you about it or taking you along. But the simple fact of the matter is that my magic wasn't about to take no for an answer, and trying to take you along would have destroyed you. My magic sometimes leads me where you can't follow. My not discussing everything with you for six hours beforehand is not a deliberate fault, it's just what has to happen. I love you, but that doesn't mean I'll always stay out of danger. *Please* stop scolding me and acting as if every time I go alone, it's a deliberate snub to you and proof that I don't care about you."

Draco just stared at him.

Harry shrugged. He'd *known* that at least one person would react like this. No matter what he did, he was too selfish/too unselfish. And that had been part of what was bearing him down, the horrible, crushing weight of trying to find some way to act which would respect everyone and injure no one, and the impossibility of finding it. Someone was always upset with him no matter what happened.

So he had chosen to act as unselfishly as possible, in the way that would let him win this war, and if Draco blamed him for it in the meantime, then Harry would live with that blame. He would have to. He couldn't act as he had been, out of control and worrying more about what people would say if they found out than getting hold of his magic.

He turned to Snape and Regulus, who had watched the scene in silence, and said, "I think it's time that we discuss going after the third Horcrux."

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-One: The New Ministry

Connor took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He was all over sweat, his hands clenched in front of him and his arms aching from the way that he gripped his knees, but he didn't care. He'd been in his room for hours, practicing and struggling with the magic that wanted to force him away from his goal. But he wouldn't give up. Not now. He was going to make it all the way through, and then he was going to be *useful* to Harry.

He forced himself forward.

It hurt. He could feel the drag on his muscles, the sheer and stubborn clutch of cloth and flesh, and the burning as he held his breath and strained for the goal. But he didn't care. He'd done harder things than this. He'd brought Harry back the night that Voldemort tried to enchant him. He'd won Quidditch games when the opposing Seeker was excellent; playing Cho Chang had been no mean feat when the Gryffindor team was exhausted from practice and Cho had a broom that was newer than his. He'd gone into his parents' trial and told everyone that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived, even though he knew what that would mean.

He strained, and strained, and when he felt his feet slipping backwards as if on a smooth marble floor, he dug them in and lunged forward.

And then he reached it.

It was like nothing he'd imagined, a freefall into enormous pain. Connor gasped and shielded his face with an arm, despite the fact that there was no one around who could have seen him. And then his arm fell away from his face as if it wasn't meant to bend that way and hit the floor with a little click, and Connor opened his eyes, and his face was different, and the mirror he'd set up across the room in hopes that this would happen showed him a wild boar.

Awed, Connor tossed his head, and nearly toppled himself forward; he hadn't realized how heavy his head would be in this incarnation. He wobbled on his legs for a moment, and that steadied him. Then he went back to admiring the sharp shine of the tusks as they extended past his jaws.

He had known he would be strong. But behind the tusks, feeling the weight of them from this side, he had a bone-deep knowledge of how deadly they really were. It was no wonder that dying by tusk used to be one of the most common deaths for Muggle hunters. A boar could defend himself.

His instincts were urging him to charge the mirror, and drive off the competitor for his territory. Connor turned away from the mirror so that he wouldn't be tempted to do that and get covered with glass shards, and then focused on changing back into his human form.

As Harry had said and Peter had promised, this was much easier than the other way around. He knew his human body better, and even though he grimaced as his bones cracked and his shoulders relaxed from their hunch and his tusks sank into his face, he also accelerated through the pain like he was on a Firebolt, while the first change had been more like riding through it on a Nimbus. And then he knelt on the floor, and panted, and sweated, and *exulted*.

Now, at least, he had a skill that no one else in Harry's army did, and he could defend Harry in unexpected ways if someone showed up to capture him. He stretched his arms over his head, and reached for the cloth that he'd put nearby, like the mirror, to clean himself off once he was done with the transformation. He had been sure that he would achieve it today, though Peter had cautioned him to wait for some time, warning him that he didn't want to attempt it two days in a row.

But Connor could do what other people thought he ought not to be able to do, and that meant that he'd done it *now*.

He wondered when, exactly, he should change into his new form and chase Parvati up and down the hall.

Draco didn't understand.

After the mess at Copley-by-the-Sea, Harry seemed both more relaxed and more intolerant than before. He brought out maps of Thornhall, which Lazuli Yaxley had given him, and laid them flat on a table in one of the Black studies while he spoke about Indigena's garden and how they would go after the Horcrux hidden there. He had either managed not to think of what the end of a

Horcrux hunt would inevitably mean, or he was ignoring it like a pro. He laughed when Peter suggested that he, Snape, and Regulus go alone, but had to admit that he wouldn't be able to enter the garden himself, as he didn't have a Dark Mark. They consulted with Hawthorn, too, since, if worst came to worst, she would be able to enter the garden as well, and she knew more about plants than the rest of them did.

Draco could see from the light in multiple eyes that the former Death Eaters were already considering which one of them should be the sacrifice.

With him, though, Harry blew hot and cold. He was happy to talk to Draco about almost anything other than the danger he was in. If Draco once began to express himself on how he felt about that, Harry Apparated away. It was an effective way to prevent an argument, but it was driving Draco slowly and steadily mad.

Today they were in front of the maps of Thornhall again, with Hawthorn diagnosing, based on eyewitness reports of what plant stalks grew above the wall, which traps were probably where. Harry sat at the head of the table, listening with an intense, thoughtful expression on his face. Connor was beside him, face flushed with the triumph of finally achieving his Animagus transformation, and Draco thought he paid more attention to that than the strategy they were discussing. Thomas sat next to Connor, his nose buried in a book about cures for plant poisons, and Peter stood beside him, eyes half-closed and face carefully blank. Snape and Regulus were on the other side of the table. Even as Draco watched, Regulus reached out an arm as if he would drape it over Snape's shoulders, and Snape shifted carefully away.

And there was Draco, sitting beside Harry, but being ignored as thoroughly as if he were another chair.

"There's no way to be sure which ones are in the middle," Hawthorn said with a small sigh, sitting back and shaking her head. "And, as you know, the artifacts that the Stone brought to us didn't include a Time-Turner, so there's no way that we can go back in time to the moment before Indigena cast the spell. What we *can* do is bring artifacts that will slow the passage of time if one of the plants stings or stabs us, and give the victim extra moments to recover." She nodded to Harry. "It's seeming more and more as if the best solution is for you to stand just outside the garden, prepared to call the shade of Tom Riddle to you when he bursts free, but not entering it."

Harry murmured something. Draco thought it had rhymes in it, but he couldn't make it out. Of course, at this point in his relationship to Harry, he had grown used to not understanding things, though he hated it.

"What was that?" Hawthorn asked.

"Nothing," Harry said, with a shake of his head, and bent over the map of Thornhall again.

A brief, annoyed look covered Hawthorn's face, which was only slightly less intimidating now that her eyes weren't amber. Draco took a kind of cold comfort in the fact that he wasn't the only one feeling left out.

"When do we begin this attack?" Peter asked. Draco glanced at him. He was rocking on his heels, face shuttered, but his hands wrapping around each other, fingers tapping against the heels of his palms over and over again. *Does Harry know that he's planning on being the sacrifice?*

"We need a day before the spring equinox." Harry rubbed a hand down the side of his face, eyes intent. "But other than that, any day will do." He looked up and met Peter's eyes, and Draco revised his opinion of Harry's intelligence upwards again. It seemed that Harry *did* know Peter was thinking about making himself the sacrifice, but the look in his eyes—Draco had lost his ability to read the emotions there, if he'd ever had it. The way that Harry looked at people who might give up their lives for him had always been too complicated for an easy resolution.

"Hmmm," said Peter, and fell silent.

Harry sighed and sat back. "Of course, if we can find out more about the garden, and research the cures to the most likely poisons, we'll be better off waiting." He nodded to Thomas, who didn't seem to have glanced up from his book once, as if he didn't realize that other people were moving around him and talking. "Lazuli is trying to find records of the plants that Indigena bought over the years, seedlings and the like. Of course, that won't tell us everything; she used her magic to change them and cross them with other species. But I'll have Neville look at them. He can tell us things that we can't know, with his genius in Herbology."

"What about Sprout?" Hawthorn asked. "Surely she should be here, too, adding to our knowledge."

Harry sighed. "They finally dug out enough of the stones at Hogwarts. She's dead. A tunnel collapsed on her while she was trying to lead several children who'd got lost out."

He said it with some mourning, some sobriety, but not the deep grief that Draco had heard him expressing just a short time ago. It seemed that Harry really had adapted, woken up from the depression consuming him, and shaken himself into a new kind of existence.

If only that didn't involve cutting me out of his life, Draco thought, unable to keep the resentment from his mind, or, it seemed, his face, because Harry turned abruptly in just that moment and met his eyes.

Draco glanced away, sullenly, but he had the feeling that Harry had already seen far too much.

“We’ll work on learning the garden,” Harry announced, and reached out to grasp Draco’s hand under the table. Draco nearly wrenched it free in sheer surprise, but Harry held it firmly, even entwining their fingers. “If we can have another week, or another two weeks, I don’t mind that. I’d much rather that we *know* the garden before we enter it, especially as I can only send my magic over the walls.”

“How is your magic, by the way?” Regulus asked, leaning around Snape to stare hard at Harry. “Exercised, since that night at Cobby-by-the-Sea?”

Harry smiled. Draco hated that smile. It was confident and powerful, which was a good thing, but it was also—it was also a smile that didn’t include him, because he didn’t know how Harry had come to the conclusions that allowed him to radiate that confidence and power.

“We’re going to be raising a new Ministry,” he reminded Regulus gently. “Who do you think will be responsible for lifting the stones into their places and making sure they’re properly fitted together according to the plans? My magic wants big, grand tasks, so I’ll make sure that it has them.”

Regulus blinked, as though he hadn’t been expecting that, though owls bearing notices about the new Ministry had been coming and going from Harry to his Light allies all week. “Oh. And you’re sure that we should raise a new Ministry while Voldemort’s still at large?”

Harry nodded. “People need to see the symbol. As long as the new government operates exclusively from the Smiths’ home, and the Apollonis house, and Silver-Mirror, they can think that *we’re* the ones in charge of it, and no one else. But a Ministry will give them somewhere else to concentrate their belief, their hope, and their ire.

“Besides, Voldemort still can’t attack me directly until the equinox. I’m going to wreathe the new Ministry in wards that mean any magic he uses against it will be the same as attacking me directly, since the wards are linked to me. Yes, after the equinox it’ll be in the same danger every other place is, but that’s why I hope to destroy the Horcruxes before the equinox.”

Regulus nodded, as if that made sense. Draco supposed it did. He was simply so resentful that he didn’t want Harry explaining sanely like that, because—well, why wasn’t Harry as disturbed by their loss of constant contact and accord as Draco was?

“If that’s all?” Harry glanced around the table with raised eyebrows, and received several nods. “Thank you all for your contributions.” And he stood up, hand still firmly gripped in Draco’s, and dragged him towards the stairs.

Draco followed. Perhaps it would be Harry’s turn to scold and yell and fire off accusations, and Draco would be the one who coolly got to walk away. He’d like that.

Harry hadn’t meant to let the problem go on this long, really. He wouldn’t have let it lapse if Draco had showed the signs of learning the lessons the way he was supposed to. Harry had thought that spending time around Draco except when he was scolding would show Draco just how unwelcome the scolding was.

But now it seemed that he was learning resentment of Harry instead, and that wasn’t something Harry wanted. He wanted them to become a functioning team again, partners in every sense of the word. It *needed* to happen. It needed to happen because Harry wanted that back again, that sense of agreement and mutual dependence with Draco that he hadn’t felt in nearly a month, and it needed to happen because the war effort needed them together, matched, presenting a perfect front.

Harry was wise enough not to mention the war effort reason. It wasn’t as important as the other one, anyway. But the fact remained that it was there, part of the equation, and part of the reason that he had been trying to agree with Draco when Draco wasn’t trying to control his life. They *needed* to be together. He *needed* Draco, and there was nothing shameful about that need,

any more than there was about the need to keep breathing.

He sat down on their bed, and reached across to clasp Draco's other hand. Draco avoided his gaze, sullenly staring at the corner of the room where Argutus had taken to making his pallet instead.

"Well," said Harry. "I suppose I'll have to take up Padma on that date she asked me on after all."

That got Draco's attention, of course, as few other things would have. His head snapped around, an ugly expression of jealousy twisting his features. "What?" he barked.

Harry sighed and lay down, then drew Draco into his arms before he could protest. He kissed him, and Draco stiffened for a moment, as if he expected that the kiss was more a persuasive technique than something Harry was doing because he wanted to.

It was *both*. Harry wondered if he should just explain that in plain and simple terms. Draco didn't seem able to understand it otherwise.

"I was joking," he whispered. "There's been precious little playfulness in our relationship of late, Draco. I'm trying to bring it back."

"Saying that you might accept dates with other people isn't the way to do it," Draco muttered, and tucked his head under Harry's chin so that he couldn't be kissed any more. But he didn't move away, at least, so that was something.

Harry continued speaking, quietly and calmly. "I know that you're worried for me. I know that you love me. And I love you, in return, and I've tried to be patient with the scolding. But I'm at a point in my life right now where I *literally* can't take it, Draco. I can't bear it, for your sake or my sake or the sake of the war. And I don't think I should have to. Maybe someday, when things are calmer, I'll be able to listen to you chide me with nothing more than a fond smile on my face. But not now, Draco." He paused. "Do you understand?"

"No," Draco whinged. Harry rolled his eyes, but listened. It was what he'd come here to do, after all, and have done. "You can't simply charge off into danger, Harry. It's a continuation of bad habits."

"So is your whinging."

"I *do not*—" Draco was trying to pull away so that he could look Harry in the eye.

"I let you come with me into battle," Harry said quietly. "I did it even when the vampire hive queen came to Hogsmeade, and we didn't know if it would be safe for you to go. Remember? And I do it without whinging and without complaining, Draco. Yes, I worry for you. Yes, I take every precaution that I can to keep you safe. And yes, I freeze when someone snatches you. But that doesn't mean that I insist you tell me your every movement before you leave our rooms, or before we go into battle."

"That's different," Draco said.

"Why?"

"I won't charge off recklessly."

Harry snorted. "But you have plenty of other bad habits, Draco. Why should I indulge your bad habits when you make a point not to indulge mine? As you said, running off without my head on straight is a habit I really need to break. And worrying over me like a mother Augurey with one chick is a habit *you* need to get rid of."

"But you *need* me to do that," Draco said, and this time he did jerk back so that they were eye-to-eye. "No one else looks out for you the way I do, Harry. And how many times would you have died if not for me?"

"Snape looks out for me," said Harry comfortably. "And I don't like even that, though he's my guardian and my father. Connor looks out for me, and I resent that because *I* was trained to protect *him*, and I think he has more bravery than sense. Hawthorn does what she can to protect me, and has since I started giving her the Wolfsbane. Peter, likewise; he broke out of Azkaban and risked having his soul eaten to come and warn me about the phoenix web and the extent of Dumbledore's duplicity."

"I've still saved your life!"

"And likewise," said Harry, his mind going back to their battle at Woodhouse their fifth year. "Remember? Greyback tried to eat

you, and I stopped him. And then Whitecheek tried to eat me, and you stopped her. We're mutually bound to each other, Draco. We owe each other debts. You have to stop acting as though you have the right to scold me when you won't permit me the same thing; you get sulky and fight back when I get upset with you, but you likewise get sulky when I do something like Apparate away from you."

"You should stay here and finish the argument."

"In what way?" Harry cocked his head. "With promises not to do it anymore? You'll discard those, and for good reason. With explanations? You don't believe those. With demonstrations of how I can take care of myself? You don't believe *me*."

Draco scowled at him.

"We *both* have the right to be upset," said Harry. "I don't know how else to convey that to you."

Draco opened his mouth, then shut it and took a deep breath. Noticing the spots of color high on his cheeks, Harry was content to wait. It sounded as though Draco was about to say something that wasn't easy for him, and he had always needed some time and preparation before he did that.

"I hate this," he said, in a voice low and passionate enough that Harry felt his temperature jump. "I just—there's nothing I can *do*, Harry. Haven't I changed enough? Isn't there a point at which I'm allowed to do as I like, because—because what else can I do or be?"

"Changing never stops, Draco," Harry said. "Maybe it could, if there was nothing about you that ever hurt you or irritated other people. But this irritates me. I can keep leaving during the arguments. I don't like to, but I can do it. Or you can change. Or we can work on this together."

Draco blew his breath out again, and considered his words carefully. Harry was glad of that. More of the wounds between them had come of ill-considered language and snapped insults than anything else.

"I suppose that's true," he said at last, with supreme reluctance. "But do we have to talk about it right now?"

"You would rather do something else?" Harry asked, and had to grin as Draco abruptly rolled and pushed him flat on his back.

"Yes, *damn it*," Draco snarled. "I've missed being able to talk with you like a normal human being, but I've also missed having sex, Harry." He bent and pressed his lips against Harry's firmly enough that Harry opened his mouth without protest, and he sighed slightly as their tongues tangled together.

He enjoyed it, but he could keep his enjoyment of it from taking him over and making him desperate for Draco's touch. Maybe that was the meaning of what he'd learned after fighting the basilisks. He could work to keep things in balance, now, and for him, work still came before pleasure.

But pleasure had its place, and so he lay kissing Draco, and willingly shed his robe when Draco tugged at it, silently asking him to, and gasped when Draco took him in his mouth.

There was—this was far from being a solution to their problems, Harry thought, his head thrashing as thoughts and sensations spun through his head and danced around each other. But it was a start. And at least Draco hadn't exploded into screams, and Harry hadn't felt the need to Apparate away before the conversation was finished.

And at least they might be able to work on finding a way forward now—

Draco *sucked* hard, and Harry arched his back with a gasp. He was babbling nonsense. He didn't care. It was nonsense that both of them needed to hear, right now.

He could do this. He'd learned to stop thinking he couldn't, and that might be the most valuable thing in the world right now.

Not the most urgent, though, which was the need to experience more of what Draco was doing, and then just a little more, and then a bit more.

They had talked long and often before they'd chosen the site for the new Ministry. In London, near Diagon Alley, would have

been ideal, but Harry had said time and time again that he didn't fancy showing off any magic in front of Muggles, even accidentally, given the oaths that he'd sworn to with the International Confederation of Warlocks. So, in the end, they had chosen a magically protected valley in Wales, rather like Woodhouse, but without magic *quite* as sentient, and which Harry had purchased from its owners instead of taking by force of war.

Snape rehearsed the facts over and over again in his mind to keep himself from being distracted by Regulus's warm breath on the back of his neck. Why the other man insisted on standing right behind him was a mystery of the universe that Snape didn't think he was meant to figure out.

He watched as Harry nodded to the crowd watching him and strode out to the pile of rocks quarried and chosen to form the sides of the new Ministry's walls. He'd made a short speech welcoming everyone and thanking them for their support of the new Ministry. Snape wondered that his son couldn't see the greedy gleams in most of their eyes. They didn't care about the ideals that the Ministry supposedly stood for, or even the dead people this building would in part be a memorial to. They just wanted to have pieces of the power and positions that its rising promised.

Harry wanted to form a new world with this Ministry, but Snape didn't think he would get one. The people making up that world were the same self-centered and selfish wizards and witches as ever, after all.

"Severus," Regulus whispered, and Snape had to work hard to suppress the urge to shiver.

"*What?*" he said, in a tone so cutting that he hoped Regulus would give it up.

"Have you thought about what's going to happen after the war?" Regulus sounded genuinely interested, which Snape thought all the more bizarre as Harry began to raise the stones. Why wasn't he paying attention to the magic going on in front of them, a feat that none of them had ever seen and would probably never see again? "I can't imagine that you'll return to Hogwarts and teach."

"And why *not*?" Snape sniped. The first rocks were hovering off the ground now, swinging about as though clutched by the strands of an invisible spiderweb. Snape could, just, feel the immense power of the magic that ran through them, to support that much weight, and so delicately. "Do you think I'm that bad at teaching, that whoever the new Headmaster was would not rehire me?"

"Severus." Regulus was patient, and when would he learn that Snape didn't like to be called by his first name? "You're the Headmaster now. You could appoint someone else to teach Potions, and take care of the children. But I don't know if that responsibility is really what you want."

"You're right," said Snape. The first blocks were swinging into place now, settling on each other. Harry left empty spaces in the middle of them, delicately arched windows. Should Voldemort attack this Ministry in the same way he had attacked the last, he would not be able to block all the entrances. The windows would provide quick escapes for those who needed them. If Regulus would just leave him alone and let him enjoy this sight, Snape thought, everything would be all right. "I want to brew potions, and look after Harry. *Alone.*"

"Bah," said Regulus comfortably. "Draco will be there, and Harry's brother. And you could use some other company, too."

Snape held his tongue until the first tunnel of magic sprang into being around the window, raising gasps from those who watched. Even Snape, who had known this would happen, was faintly impressed. Harry was holding all those stones in place still, maneuvering the current ones into position, and setting up permanent, elegant defenses at the same time. These tunnels would be the means of protecting the escape routes, while at the same time providing many-colored slides to the ground. And since Harry was weaving them so powerfully of his own magic and his own essence, Voldemort couldn't attack them until after the spring equinox.

The final form of the Ministry was truly visible, now that the first window and first slide had emerged as a pattern. And now the enchanted lines of light that marked the plans for Harry to follow sparked to life. The final Ministry would be an enormous tower, Snape thought, built of this strong marble veined with blue and delicate shades of green. Windows everywhere would let the light in, while curved tunnels and staircases embraced the darkness. The symbolism wasn't subtle at all, but then, subtlety would have been lost on the imbeciles around them.

Snape wondered if it was lost on Regulus.

He hissed, as he strained his eyes to watch the stones high above the ground rotating like lazily circling birds, "It would please me if *you* left me alone, Regulus, at least."

Regulus's hand came to rest on his shoulder, unexpected and warm and making Snape jolt forward.

"You don't believe that," Regulus breathed.

"I do," Snape said, loudly enough to make the neighbors look over. And Regulus *wouldn't take his hand off Snape's shoulder*, damn him.

"Let me talk to you about this for a little while longer," Regulus proposed, "and then you'll believe me."

Snape glanced tiredly back at him, even as another gasp of awe rose up from the throats around them. "When are you going to give it up, Regulus? I am not loveable. I am not worth pursuing."

Regulus dipped his head and gave him a kiss on the back of the neck. Snape closed his eyes, and wondered where the dizziness spinning his head around had come from.

"Let me change your mind about that," Regulus whispered.

And when would Snape find the *heart* to say no, and when would Regulus find the *wits* to believe him?

It made sense, didn't it? It just made sense.

Peter hadn't been in the habit of hiding from the truth about himself since his seventh year at Hogwarts. Sure, he'd been in the habit of hiding from the truth about other people, or he would never have spent twelve years in Azkaban under the delusion that the people who had sent him there cared about him. But himself—himself, he knew, and he knew the risks he took and what they would cost him. And he'd always been willing to pay the prices.

And now—well, now, he had clearer eyes, and he could see other people.

He saw other people busy, and healthy, and happy. Hawthorn was beginning to thrive again now that she was free of the werewolf curse. She deserved a life that would be happier than the one she'd had so far.

Lucius had not changed that much after Narcissa died, except in quiet ways. He would never give up his life willingly for Harry, Peter knew that much. Of course, there was the fact that one could decide to die for the Horcrux instead of for the person trying to destroy the Horcrux, but Lucius wouldn't do that, either. The man was simply too accustomed to thinking in terms of gambits for power, not sacrifices.

Severus and Regulus had each other, now, or would as soon as Regulus overcame Severus's stubbornness. Peter knew he could do that. He'd seen Regulus do the impossible on a daily basis when they were all Death Eaters together, back when the world was even darker than it was now.

Henrietta—well, Peter had found and read one of her letters to Evan Rosier once, a mixture of poetry and wooing that would draw that madman close if anything could. It was blindingly obvious what Henrietta planned to do, especially the way that she sometimes looked at Peter with kind, wild eyes, as if she understood. So Peter nodded to her, and they saluted each other in odd ways, and left each other alone.

Draco or Connor was capable of dying for Harry, but Harry would break if he lost either of them. It could not be allowed to happen.

There were so few other people close to Harry, so few others who could be trusted. They would die for the Horcruxes, they would die for Harry, but they couldn't be counted on *not to hesitate*. The death they pictured was death in battle, where they didn't know it was coming beforehand, not this premeditated sacrifice.

All of which made Peter the best choice to destroy Ravenclaw's wand, really.

He loved Harry. He had felt sorry enough for him, and determined enough to right the wrongs done to both of them, to break out of Azkaban and go to him, but it had long since become more than that. Harry was someone else who had lived through shadow and out of shadow and into light. He had given Peter strength when he needed it, strength for both his own life and to handle the challenges that healing and helping Harry flung at him. He could do this.

And Peter had no truly close friends, or someone in love with him. He was one of Harry's allies, and the former Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, and, in some ways, the last of the Marauders. And nothing other than that, so he could more easily let go of his grasp of life. It was not that *no* one would miss him, but he would cause less of a hole by his passing than many others would.

Sometimes, he thought Harry knew what he planned, the way he watched him with dark, sober eyes, and was mature enough now not to let the knowledge plague him.

Other times, he was sure Harry had no idea, or he would have interfered, nosily and messily.

And it *would* be interference. Peter had decided, of his own free will, to become the sacrifice, to take his own life, and that fulfilled all the requirements for breaking the Unassailable Curse other than the actual death itself.

Peter leaned his head back, and breathed.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Two: Top-Heavy

Connor heard a squeal, and charged out of the side-corridor where he'd been hiding, head lowered. Parvati uttered another gasp, skittered ahead of him, and then began to run. Connor locked his trotters in place briefly so that he could stand still and adjust his momentum, and raced after her.

His hooves clicked and rustled on the stone in quite a different way, he was vaguely aware, than they would if he were running through a forest. His tusks occasionally scraped a wall, but Connor was sure that someone, Regulus or Harry, could heal the gouges in the stone that they left. Gouges in things weren't as important as gouges in people, anyway.

He turned a corner, and found Parvati standing with her wand pointed at him. Connor slowed to a stop and snorted menacingly. He realized the bristles around his shoulders were standing out like a lion's mane, and was delighted. He uttered another snort, and then deliberately reached out with a hoof and pawed once, twice, a third time.

Parvati broke and ran again. Connor squealed in turn and lowered his head, focusing on her legs. He would see how close he could get before care for her forced him to stop and not use his tusks.

As it turned out, he didn't get that close. Parvati had cast a glamour over a dip in the floor, a small hole that was meant to provide light and air to the room below. Connor's forelegs plunged into it, and the weight of his head made him tip further forward. In seconds, he hung trapped, kicking and snorting, his hind legs flopping helplessly on the floor just above the hole.

Parvati paced back towards him, turning her wand in her fingers, smile smug. "Need some help, Connor?" she inquired sweetly.

As it turned out, he did. Connor could change back, but he knew his legs would slip into the hole if he did so, and he'd probably tumble straight through and to the floor below. And he didn't fancy breaking his leg, or, for that matter, his back. He gave her a plaintive look.

"Say you're sorry for chasing me." Parvati was tapping her wand against the heel of her hand now, and trying, very obviously and very hard, to keep from smiling.

Connor blinked at her. She was the one who had asked him to chase her!

She shook her head and clucked her tongue when he gave her his incredulous look. "No, Connor, not fair. You *scared* me. You say sorry politely, or I won't help you now."

Connor cast his eyes down and uttered several soft, wet snorts that he hoped conveyed the meaning well enough, since he couldn't use words. He felt her hand descend and smooth over his face for a moment, pushing aside bristles and short dark fur.

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," said Parvati, and lifted him out of the hole, setting him gently on his trotters beyond it. Then she paused and eyed him suspiciously, as if realizing that he could chase her again, and leap the hole now that he knew it was there. Connor changed back to human instead, to show good faith.

Parvati at once came over and hugged him. "Thank you," she whispered against his ear. "It helps me forget my loneliness."

Connor nodded and smoothed a hand up and down her back. Padma had decided to go back to their parents that morning. Connor understood why; she'd originally left them for Luna, and now that Luna was dead, she didn't feel as if she had to stay merely because of her sister and the war. There was nothing that she could contribute specifically to the war effort, anyway, while Parvati felt as if she could. Parvati had argued, but hadn't been able to hold her sister back.

"As long as I'm here, you'll never be lonely," Connor promised, and ran his fingers through her hair. She tilted her face back for a kiss, and he was more than happy to give it.

But the back of his mind ran along on dissatisfied tracks. Now that he'd mastered his Animagus form, he needed something else to do. And comforting Parvati, as nice as it was, wasn't enough to take up his day. She needed some time by herself, too, after all, so he couldn't be with her every single moment.

Owls *had* arrived from the Light members of Harry's new alliance and new Ministry, asking to meet the Light wizard closest to Harry. But Connor had been reluctant to accept the invitations. He knew so little of pureblood politics that he'd probably offend someone accidentally and cost them the war. Or he'd make a fool of himself, and that would make people think *Harry* could be taken advantage of, if he sent such foolish messengers, and that would cause unnecessary conflict and friction. But Connor wasn't sure how much he could learn, either. It wasn't as though anyone had time to teach him the dances right now.

And then a thought occurred to him, and he smiled.

"What is it?" Parvati asked curiously, pulling back to stare at him.

"Just an idea I had." Connor kissed her cheek. "I was remembering that I have a twin, too, and I haven't asked for anything from him in quite a while. I think he can help me be more useful."

Harry gave him a strange look. "I'm not entirely sure that the Switching Potion actually works like that, Connor," he said slowly. "One can transfer pain, I know, the way that it was once used to transfer labor pains when the mother would have been overwhelmed by them. And one can transfer emotions, or curses lodged in the flesh, or dreams, the way that we did when you took Voldemort's visions for me. But knowledge? I don't know if you could learn the pureblood dances that way."

"*Please.*" Connor couldn't believe he didn't see how useful this would be. "It's not as though the knowledge would leave you while you educated me. It—"

Harry had raised his eyebrows, which meant he was about to interrupt. "Of course it does, Connor. That's why it's called the *Switching* Potion. It doesn't leave behind a residue. For the length of time the switch lasts, it's supposed to remove the emotions, or pain, or whatever they are, entirely from the head and body of one person and put them into the head and body of another person. I wouldn't know the pureblood dances while you had them."

Connor gnawed his lip. He had to admit he hadn't thought of that. But then he perked up. There was an obvious solution, and Harry was a bit dim-witted for not seeing it, wasn't he? "Then just lend the knowledge to me for the duration of one meeting with your Light allies," he said. "You won't need them for just a few hours, would you? You're surrounded by people who love you and won't expect you to be on your best behavior. But the Light allies will expect that from *me*."

"I suppose that might work." Harry sounded doubtful. "I'm willing to try, at least. But remember, I can't recall reading that the Switching Potion was ever used to transfer knowledge."

Connor beamed. "That's all right. If you try, and it doesn't work, well, it doesn't matter. I'll just keep avoiding them. But if we try and it *does* work, then I can learn something, and even when the knowledge is gone, at least I'll remember what it felt like. Maybe that will tell me what books I should study. Just as long as we can work on this, Harry?"

He looked, and saw an answering spark in his brother's eyes. For a moment, it went out, as though Harry had remembered something, but when Connor asked, Harry just shook his head and said, "Nothing. Thinking, that's all."

That was *such* a lie. But Connor couldn't help people who insisted on being liars this way. Harry would have to be the one who came around and decided to tell Connor what he was anguished about. "We need hippogriff feathers, don't we?" he asked. "And two red stones. One of them with your magical essence, and one of them with mine."

Harry nodded. "I'll be the one brewing the potion, of course," he said.

Connor shrugged. Being good at potions had never mattered to him, not when the man teaching it was a sadistic wanker. Being good at things you hated was for Hermione, not him. “Of course you will. But I can help gather some of the ingredients, and you need me to hold the chip of red stone and concentrate on what I want to do.”

“And it still may not work,” Harry added, but this time a different kind of spark had lit his eyes, the pleasure of experimentation and adding to his knowledge. “But we’ll try it, and see if it does.”

The potion had worked. And carrying all that extra knowledge in his head was an unpleasant experience, not that Connor would have believed that if someone had told him before he took the potion. It felt as if he had a—a *lump* on his forehead that other people could see, like a unicorn’s horn. He bowed to Cupressus Apollonis, in the way that the rituals said a guest entering an older wizard’s house was supposed to, and felt as if the knowledge would slosh over the rim of his head like water from a kappa’s hollow.

Cupressus paused, and his fingers briefly flexed. Connor knew that was a sign of uncertainty. He suspected he’d absorbed some of Harry’s knowledge of individual people along with the pureblood dances. The request they made of the Switching Potion hadn’t been that specific, after all. Connor had concentrated on knowledge that would let him survive the political dances approaching, and the potion probably thought that included perceptiveness and notice of mannerisms as well as the proper depth of bows and what fork to use.

“Mr. Potter,” Cupressus murmured. “I thought you had not been trained in the formal pureblood ways?”

“It’s true that my parents didn’t see fit to raise me that way,” Connor said calmly, lifting his head. “Perhaps my father was ashamed of having a halfblood child.” *Insult yourself first, show that you’re at home with what you are, and that’s one weapon that your enemies can’t use against you.* “But I have made some effort to learn of my heritage in the years since.”

“Only proper for the master of Lux Aeterna, I suppose,” Cupressus murmured, eyes locked on his face.

Connor nodded serenely.

“But few traces of this knowledge have shown before,” Cupressus said, probing delicately, like the jab of a pike’s nose.

Connor let himself chuckle, because the knowledge pressing against his brow said that would be all right. It felt as if the knowledge were right behind his heart-shaped scar, in fact, an even odder sensation than the ones he’d already experienced. “Well, of course they haven’t. We wanted to keep it safe and secret until there was a moment when our allies would benefit from knowing that I could dance.” He cocked his head. “And, of course, this will encourage you to trust me more, and that might bind you more tightly to Harry’s side.” This kind of dangerous honesty was expected at gatherings of Light wizards and witches, his new instincts told him.

A genuine smile crossed Cupressus’s face, and he gestured Connor ahead of him, into a room covered with windows, mirrors, and small glass decorations that flashed back the light at him. “And why did you Declare for the Light, Mr. Potter, when your brother is so firm in his devotion to both sides?”

Connor consulted the rituals. They told him that such a question would usually be impolite—but when asked of someone who’d given no reason for such insults, it said that the asker respected the guest. Cupressus wanted to know, and was counting on Connor to be adult enough to share his reasons for his Declaration.

“My parents, flawed as they were, managed to give me a set of morals that were worthwhile,” Connor answered, as he sat down on one of the white divans at Cupressus’s gesture, and then accepted a glass of wine that a woman, probably Cupressus’s wife Artemis, handed him. She didn’t speak yet, but that was only proper, since Connor was a guest and Cupressus was the most powerful wizard in the room. “Not their extreme idea of sacrifice, of course, though I believed in that until the end of my third year of Hogwarts, when I saw someone make a sacrifice that taught me what *real* Light was and awakened me from my daze.” He took a sip of wine to hide the lump that rose in his throat even now at the thought of Sirius. *He would never have had to do that if I had just paid more attention.* “But other things—compassion, that we share the world with more people than just ourselves, that the future as well as the past is important—stuck with me, and those seem to me to be the essence of Light.”

Cupressus smiled slowly. “We could have much to talk about, you and I,” he murmured, “many interesting arguments to conduct. But today you are a guest in my house, and, as such, we will not debate.” He reached out and touched his wife on the arm, guiding her in front of him. “This is my wife, Artemis. Artemis, Connor Potter.”

Artemis made a little curtsy, every movement bespeaking the trained way she'd been taught to move. No one was that graceful naturally. Connor waited until she'd fully risen before he set aside his wine and dipped his head to his knees from his sitting position. It was a profoundly respectful move, and he could feel Artemis's pleasure in it.

"I wondered," said Cupressus, gently guiding his wife back to a divan beside him, "whether you would be amenable to meeting a few more guests?"

"I had expected it," said Connor, and grinned at him around the cup he'd picked up again. "I think there were some invitations waiting for me from the Smiths and other families, after all."

"I think Miriam is quite enough for tonight," said Cupressus, and rose, touching something on his neck. Connor squinted, and caught a gleam of gold. His newly acquired knowledge told him it was a message-medallion, resembling the one that Harry had and could use to call Rita Skeeter. It probably sent a tingle of warmth to Miriam Smith to tell her that Cupressus wished to speak to her. "After all, you already know her son. You should be right at home. And you may come into the true receiving room, now. We call it the Chamber of the Stars."

Connor saw why as soon as he stepped past the doors. The whole room was white, but white in the ethereal manner of moonlight or starlight, without a trace of the blinding golden sunshine that had filled the last room. Chairs sat everywhere, covered in delicate white cloth that Connor couldn't identify. But they were arranged so that they faced the window, which looked on a scene of summer constellations—that much, Connor knew from Astronomy. There was a sense of brooding peace here which relaxed Connor's muscles at once, and which he'd never felt anywhere else.

"This is a room where only our trusted guests, those truly devoted to the Light, can come," said Cupressus, and gestured Connor to a chair at the apex of the pattern the furniture formed, like the pattern of geese in flight. "And I feel that you truly are, young man, though admittedly, we have exchanged few words so far."

Connor felt a tingle of pleasure. This wasn't something that Harry's knowledge could really help him with, since Harry had never been invited into this room and didn't know the history of the chair-pattern or these particular constellations, but he found he didn't mind. He felt as if *he* had earned this, rather than his brother earning it for him, and it was damn good. He took the seat with earnest grace and dignity, and Cupressus and Artemis sat on either side of him. A moment later, a house elf escorted Miriam Smith into the room.

Connor thought he would have known her for Zacharias's mother even without the introduction. The strong lines around her nose and mouth were the same, and her eyes were high and piercing, a cool hawk's gaze, less merciful than judgmental. But that was all right, he thought, as he stood to greet her. The Light needed hawks, too, along with those who would spare their enemies because they begged nicely.

"Madam Smith," he said, taking her hand.

Miriam examined him as if looking for a sign that he was making fun of her. Connor knew why. Miriam only deserved the formal title if Connor was treating her as the leader of Hope for Light, and she didn't know that Connor would consider her that way.

After a time, however, she seemed convinced that he meant his courtesy; perhaps it was the soft, reverent kiss he pressed to the back of her hand. She thawed visibly, and gave him a slow nod, as if to say that he would do, then gestured him back towards his seat, taking the one on the other side of Cupressus.

"What would you say the place of the Light is in our new world, from your point of view, Mr. Potter?" she asked.

The dances told him to be cautious. But they also encouraged dangerous honesty, exceptions to the rules that were made when emotions were strong. Connor thought he knew the true difference between Light and Dark pureblood dances, now. The Dark dances could be altered or broken when the person doing it thought the risk worth the gain in power or prestige it would produce. Light wizards and witches would do it to give other people more of a voice in the conversation, unbound by convention, or to show how much they respected and admired them.

Given that, it was easy to meet Miriam's eyes and say, "I think that we'll have exactly as much of a place as we're willing to work for."

Cupressus and Miriam exchanged a flickering look so quick that Connor might have missed it without Harry's perceptions behind his eyes. Then Miriam said, "That is—interesting, Mr. Potter. I would have expected something more diplomatic from you, something more loyal to your brother."

And so she took a risk of her own, and left the road open. Connor could retreat and modify his words, or accept the chance, keep pressing ahead.

Connor chose to keep pressing ahead. He knew that Miriam Smith had been a Hufflepuff, because Zacharias, of course, had *had* to brag how every recent descendant of Helga went to her House. It was possible that she didn't understand the way that a Gryffindor nearly always thought the risk worth the taking.

"I love my brother," he said. "But I know his shortcomings, and one of them is that *he* doesn't understand nearly as much of Light history as he should, either. He is more than happy to welcome Light participation in his political endeavors. But he doesn't think like someone to whom the allegiance is important, because to him it's *not* more important than the Dark. So, to counteract the influence of Dark wizards—including, I'm sorry to say, in corners where Harry won't think to look for it, because he can be naïve about things like bribery and corruption—we'll have to keep alert. Not break the alliance, of course, but show that we're committed to both our side *and* it. And that's actually an advantage for us, since we're more used to thinking in terms of cooperation than most of the Dark wizards are."

"Very interesting," Cupressus said, his eyes half-lidded. "Then you think Light-Dark conflicts will still happen?"

"Of course." Connor waved a hand. He didn't know if these words sprang mostly from himself, or from a combination of his knowledge and Harry's, and he didn't truly care. He was enjoying himself too much. "Sooner or later, a time will come when Harry's defeat of Voldemort is ancient history. That won't stop another Dark Lord from trying to rise, even if it doesn't happen for a few generations after this one. Rather than relying on stories to stop Dark-Light conflicts in the future, we'd be better advised to set up laws and traditions and rituals right now that will last to our children and beyond and can be binding. We have a unique chance, with the Ministry fallen. We should use it to its fullest, not get involved in petty arguments."

"You are considerably wiser than I thought you were, Mr. Potter," Miriam murmured. "I am glad to see that at least one of Harry's closest advisers is on the side of the Light."

Connor beamed at her, and ignored the impulse in his head that pointed out he couldn't be like this all the time, because Harry would have to drink the other half of the Switching Potion when he went back to Silver-Mirror and take up the knowledge again. He tended to handle things as they came up. This had been a spur-of-the-moment plan, and it was working well. If something arose in the future that required knowledge of dances and Light psychology like this, he would figure out another way to achieve it.

"Connor? Can I talk to you?"

Connor couldn't actually identify the voice before he turned, which was unusual; even with as many people as were in and out of Silver-Mirror these days, he had thought he knew them all. But he understood when he turned and saw Michael Rosier-Henlin jogging up the hall behind him. If Michael had spoken to him since he awakened, Connor couldn't remember it.

"Michael." Connor nodded, and tried to restrain the thoughts of the knowledge in his head, which was insisting that Michael had acted in bad faith as a sworn companion. Yes, he probably had, but Connor wasn't Harry, no matter how much he might think like him right now, and some people just weren't meant to be sworn companions. It wasn't a horrible fault that Michael had failed at it.

"I wanted to know if I could talk to you, sometimes," Michael said, halting in front of him and panting as if he'd run a long way. He had a pale, tired face, Connor thought, but he didn't think that was the aftermath of nightmares. He knew what that was like too well. Right now, he just looked as if he lay awake all night worrying.

"Why?" Connor asked. "We're not friends, and I'm not even really friends with your brother." Harry had Owen Rosier-Henlin working on ways to fit pureblood Dark ritual into the Ministry. Connor understood that right now better than he had this morning, but he didn't think it was interesting.

"I know that," Michael said, and shoved his hands into his robe pockets, and bowed his head. "I just—I suppose it's nothing. I felt as though you were the person who could understand me best." His ears flushed red. "But it's not important, and I'm sure that you have things to do." He turned hastily away.

Connor called after him, and that wasn't Harry's compassion, just his own. "Wait! What do you mean, understand you?"

Michael hesitated, then turned around and spoke very quickly, as if he had decided that, since he was going to expose his heart, he

should do it all at once. “Well, I’m a younger twin, and I failed at being a sworn companion, and because I was antagonistic towards Harry no one trusts me with responsibility. And you’re a younger twin, and you had responsibility taken away from you, but you’ve done well with it, and Harry trusts you, and *everyone* trusts you, and—I wanted to know how you did it, that’s all, how you got forgiven.” He flushed again, obviously humiliated. “But I know that—“

“I’d like to talk to you,” Connor said quietly.

Michael stopped and blinked. “Really?”

“Yes.” Connor nodded. He could feel interest stirring in him. He liked helping people, and this was really the first time he’d ever had a chance to help a person with a problem like this. It wasn’t as though the Yaxley twins had ever approached him and asked for help in being the younger twin of a more educated and famous older brother, after all. “And I understand what you mean about being alone. That was the way I felt at the end of my third year and the beginning of my fourth at Hogwarts.”

Michael once again turned crimson, and raked a hand through his hair. “I suppose it seems pathetic, someone at eighteen asking for help in things you figured out when you were thirteen,” he muttered.

“It was *hard* work,” Connor assured him, mind going back to those days immediately after Sirius’s death when he was simultaneously determined to change himself and determined to do it without leaning on Harry. “I would have welcomed help then. And I’ve never really had a chance to talk to someone about it. I’ll help you, if you’d like. You’d be helping me, by listening.”

Hesitantly, Michael nodded. “Tomorrow morning, then? I mean, if you don’t have anything else to do then.”

Connor grinned, looking forward to the prospect of talking to someone who wasn’t Parvati, Peter, or Harry. “Sure! Meet you in the kitchen after breakfast? I don’t think many people come in there during the early part of the morning. Harry always holds his meetings in the study now.”

Michael’s face did darken at the mention of Harry, but Connor had felt the same way when he was struggling to overcome his training. Then he smiled and said, “Sounds good. See you later, Connor.” He waved at him and walked on up the corridor, a slight spring in his steps that hadn’t been there a short time before.

Connor went on his way to the library where Harry would be waiting with the other half of the Switching Potion, well-pleased with himself. He liked it when he could make a difference, and not just his status as Harry’s brother.

He slowed to a stop outside the library, because Harry was—shouting at someone. That was unusual. Harry was calm almost all the time, and when he wasn’t, it seemed that he had the influence of the pureblood dances to give him a way to restrain his temper.

And right now, he doesn’t have them, since they’re in your head.

His skin tingling with a premonition of disaster—how in the world *would* Harry react without part of his training?—Connor slid his head around the corner and peered cautiously into the library.

Harry stood in front of a table spread with maps, his arms folded and his magic writhing about his shoulders and head in a set of black, cold spikes that reminded Connor of his own bristles as a boar. Draco stood in front of him, face blotchy, but pale except where the hectic color showed.

“Take that *back*,” Draco hissed.

Harry closed his eyes as if trying to calm himself down, but Connor could see already that it wouldn’t work. It never did when the pulse was beating in his brother’s throat that way. And, sure enough, words slipped out a moment later, sounding as if forced out between Harry’s teeth, but there nevertheless.

“I want to. But I am so *tired*, Draco, of the way that you never seem convinced I love you no matter what I do! We have sex, and you want me to talk to you. I talk to you, and you want me to make you promises. I make you promises, and you’re convinced I’m going to break them. And then I *have* to break them, and you accuse me of being a selfish, self-centered prick—“

“Sometimes, that’s what you *are*!” Draco shouted. He looked half-surprised. Connor supposed that he hadn’t got this far in an argument with Harry before, because usually by this point Harry had walked away or tightened himself into a rational state of mind. But he couldn’t right now, because his rational state of mind was with Connor. “And don’t you accuse me of being the only

problem here. You know that I ask for perfectly reasonable things from you, you always knew that I was going to ask them, and then you act like they're surprises—"

"And you knew this was going to be a war, and you're asking me to abandon it for you!" Harry shouted.

"I'm asking you to treat me like a person!" Sparks of wandless magic were leaping around Draco now. Connor cautiously drew his wand, just in case Draco set something on fire and he had to put it out, but he didn't plan to interfere unless something like that happened. This was probably a fight that Draco and Harry had needed to have. "You're more important than the war to me, Harry. Can you honestly say the same thing about me?"

Harry threw up his hands. The spikes shifted to accommodate them, and then rushed backward as his shoulders seemed to sink into his spine. "If I said it honestly, would you believe me?"

Draco snarled at him.

"Yes, you are more important to me than the war," Harry said. "It feels like you are. Is that what you want me to say, Draco?" He fell silent for a moment, biting his lip, and Connor could see the emotions fighting in his eyes. They won out. "But I *have* to fight this war. If I don't, I'm more evil than Voldemort is."

"I'm not asking you to give up fighting the war," Draco said. His voice had deepened again, losing the high pitch it had had when Connor first heard him yelling. "Just pay more attention to me."

"I do! When you ask for it."

"And *that* is the problem, Harry." Draco leaned forward and made a motion as if poking Harry in the stomach, though he wasn't silly enough to actually come closer. "Why don't you offer me comfort, companionship, talk, what I need, when I don't ask for it? Why does it always have to be right after I've been traumatized, or because I ask? I do it for you all the time. And then you accuse me of whinging."

"I'll never be able to love you the way you want," Harry hissed, with an edge of Parseltongue to the words. "I wasn't raised for it, wasn't trained for it—"

"That's just an excuse!"

"It's the *truth*!" The black spikes abruptly expanded into a corona of red and golden light around Harry's head and shoulders. "I don't know what I'm fucking *doing* half the time, Draco! And then I do something, and it's wrong, and I do something else, and *that's* wrong—"

"I've tried to tell you what I want! I don't think you need to be perfect!"

"Maybe not, but it seems like it."

"Well, that's *not true*." Draco folded his arms. "You're the one who's mistaking me now, Harry."

"I *always fucking am*!" Harry turned his back on Draco this time, but kept speaking over his shoulder, as if he couldn't bear to leave the fight completely alone. Connor thought that was a hopeful sign. Maybe. "I know it's not true, Draco, everything's not true and my perceptions are always mistaken, but it feels as if I'm always putting too much or too little effort into this, you want more spontaneity and then you want more planning—"

"I could do with some more *attention*."

"And how much is enough?" Harry yelled, and turned back again as if drawn with a magnet. His hair was on fire. Connor didn't think he noticed. "I *don't know how to do this*! I never *have*! There's no dance for it, there are no rules, or if there are, they change every time we talk—"

"You don't need *rules*," Draco said.

"There's the request for spontaneity." Harry looked simultaneously on the edge of tears and horrified at himself for being there.

"You don't need them," Draco repeated, an undertone of bitterness in his voice. "I thought you understood that, at least. I tell you when I'm happy, Harry. Isn't that enough? How much reassurance do you *need*?"

“Evidently, a lot more than I get, given that I’m still getting everything wrong,” Harry whispered.

“I just—I just wish you would give me more, that you’d be committed to helping me for my own sake, because you want to, and not because you think that you have to do certain things, or that courting couples do certain things.” Draco let out an angry, half-whistling breath. “I’m so low among your priorities that you don’t even care how to figure out what I want.”

“And every time I try, you say it’s wrong!”

“Not *every* time, you’re exaggerating—“

“And *so are you!*” Harry waved his arms around as if he were directing a concert. “I *do* think you’re important to me, Draco. But I don’t know how to express it, because the means I choose to do so aren’t sufficient! Do you have any idea how exhausting it is to keep trying and never make any progress? Obviously, because you think that I don’t love you, don’t value you, I’ve made zero progress. And there’s nothing I can do, nothing I can yield—“

“I don’t want you to give up the war.” Draco hissed again. “Weren’t you listening to me, Harry? I already *said* that!”

“Then what *do* you want?” Harry shouted.

Draco checked at that. He took a few deep breaths, then said, “For you to value me.”

“I do.” Harry’s eyes were intent on his face.

“For you to show it.”

Harry’s jaw tightened. “How?”

And Draco exploded again. “You should be the one deciding that, Harry, not me! If I have to tell you, it’s not what I want.”

Harry just stared at him, then said, so softly Connor could hardly hear him, and wondered if Draco could, “And everything I decide on to demonstrate it is wrong, not what you want, and if I don’t show it, then that’s wrong, too. Can—can you help me, Draco, please? Because I *don’t know how*.”

“No, Harry.” Draco turned away and stalked to the doorway. “This is something that you need to figure out on your own, because I’m tired of constantly helping you, protecting you from yourself, from your mistakes. You’ll need to decide how to make it up to me.”

Harry leaned his head back and shut his eyes, breathing shallowly. Connor stepped fully into the room. Draco started and gave him a nasty look.

“Eavesdropping because your own life isn’t exciting enough, Potter?” he sneered.

“Eavesdropping because it’s rather hard to ignore such an astonishing display of idiocy from the both of you,” said Connor, because he could, and because it felt good to have them gape at him as if he’d turned into a dragon, and because it was true. “Both of you want to never make a mistake again, and everything to be perfect, and it’s never going to *happen*, you know? Harry will always be broken and scarred in some ways, and Draco, you’ll always be a whiny little prat.”

“How *dare* you—“

“Oh, yes, Malfoy, that’s an incredibly original line,” Connor said with an eyeroll, and then stalked across the library to the table that held the vial with half the Switching Potion still in it. He pressed it into Harry’s hand, and Harry swallowed nervelessly. A moment later, Connor felt the knowledge leave his mind like snow melting, and Harry shut his eyes and grimaced. Connor turned around with a shake of his head. “I may not be completely right, but I know more than either of you do.”

“You don’t know shit,” Draco snarled at him.

“Remember the bit about being a prat,” Connor told him, and walked away, shaking his head. *Merlin, they are both such children sometimes.*

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: As Sleep That Lies By Death

January 17th, 1998

Have you answered the question I asked you yet, Evan, Evan, my Evan?

I did not think so, or you would have written me back before now. Let me remind you of the question, in case you have forgotten, and tell you the legend again—though since you know the poet I am thinking of, you already know the legend. But you need the story again, to know the places in which we stand.

Long ago, when she lost her power over the hearts of men, Venus, goddess of love, did not perish, but was driven underground, to dwell beneath a hill. There, her world was still as it had been, hot and heavy with the breath of sleep and desire, but she went no more above the surface, and walked no more under the sun. The light came from the shining of her hair, of her fair skin, of her incomparable eyes. For the ruin that the Muggles' Christianity brought down could make her a shadow, but it could not destroy her, any more than it could bring down the sun and the moon and the dark between the stars.

To Venus came a Christian knight, Tannhäuser, who did not believe in the legend, but who found her, and who fell down before her, and kissed her feet. He was her lover for a year, and lived marked with her kisses, tangled in the embrace of her serpents. So your poet says, Evan, and though I believe in my own ways, if it did happen, that is the way it would happen.

One day, he desired the sunlight, and, desiring, came forth from the hill, and, desiring, rode to Rome. There, he prayed for redemption. But his great heavy-crowned leader said that Tannhäuser would be a Christian again only when the leader's staff bloomed. Tannhäuser rode away again in sorrow.

And then the staff bloomed, heavy cream-like flowers with golden centers, drooping blossoms, blooms breaking off under their own weight, and filling the air with a perfume like burning incense. The knights rode hot after Tannhäuser, to bring him back, but he had vanished within Venus's hill. He never returned to the sunlight again, but sank into desire, and there stayed.

Tell me, Evan, tell me true, as you think of that legend: Who won the battle for Tannhäuser's soul?

You know the legend. You know the poem. Poetry burns in your blood. But more than legends or even poetry, you know desire, Evan. It clouds your head like the perfume of the flowers clouded the Muggles', desire to kill, to revenge yourself, to rape, to hurt, to make others listen to your songs as you slit their throats.

But look into the legend, Evan, and look into your own desire, and tell me, if I choose to reject you, that you will have any more choice than Tannhäuser would have, did Venus choose to set him outside her hill. Who holds the power here? Who desires, and who is the source of the desire?

I may yet choose to reject you, Evan, and turn all the sunlight of your world to blood.

Henrietta Bulstrode.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Three: Circumambulation

Harry pulled his head slowly out of the Pensieve, and chewed his lip for a moment, thinking. Then he shook his head. No, his memories of the fight had told him nothing useful. He became so angry when he heard Draco's words, and so ashamed when he heard his own—

Of *all* the mornings for Connor to take his self-control away—

--that he made no progress. So he would have to try some other method of figuring out what Draco wanted. Watching his expressions and the gestures he made gave Harry no clues.

Perhaps older memories were the key. Draco had said what he wanted at some points in the past. Harry had thought he'd done a fairly good job of satisfying those wants, only to realize that Draco's dissatisfaction and scoldings had never decreased, and so apparently he'd never done *that* good a job.

But that didn't mean that Draco's laundry lists of longings in the past were wrong, only the way that Harry had gone about trying to answer them. He pulled another string of memory from his head with the tip of his wand, and watched as it filled the bowl. Then he plunged his head down, and found himself standing in Hogwarts, whole again, watching in silence as two fifteen-year-olds spoke. It had been the weekend after his parents' trial, when he'd gone and talked to Draco because Vera had suggested it would do him good.

And yes, Draco's words about what he wanted were there.

"I want everything you can give me. All of what you are, Harry. I want to know things you don't even think are important about yourself yet, like what kind of tea is your favorite. I want to know that no one else means as much to you as I do. I want to be the only person you want in your bed. I want to know that you understand the things I believe in even if you don't agree with them. I want you to yell at me without holding anything back, even your magic. I want you to know my moods well enough that you know without my speaking when I need to be held, or fetched a sweet, or left alone. I want to have that kind of closeness to you that depends on choice more than it does need, and makes everyone jealous who sees it. I want sunlight love. I told you that, once, last year."

Harry pulled his head slowly out of the Pensieve, shaken and feeling as though someone had punched him in the stomach. Chills raced up his spine and ended up coiling in his belly. He couldn't even have said why he was so upset if someone asked him.

Well. That was a lie. Of course he could. He had never been *that* good at hiding from himself, only at not taking certain actions.

He wants—he wants barriers broken. He wants the kind of no-holds-barred emotion that I usually only show him during the joining rituals. He wants all these little, small things.

Why?

That was the question Harry kept running into. And that wasn't even to comment on whether Draco's wants had stayed the same over the two years between now and then. Perhaps he wanted different things now. Perhaps his desires had sharpened, and changed, and left Harry behind, and this memory was valueless.

Harry was not sure what would scare him more: the idea that Draco had changed, so that he still had no idea where to start on repairing the breach, or the idea that he hadn't, which would mean Harry had to give him—this.

He might not be afraid of what I'm like when I'm holding nothing back, not even the magic. But I am. I'm like Voldemort in the midst of my hatred, or in the midst of that insane Dark rage. I'm like I was with the wild Dark, so committed to achieving what I want that the method I have to use to get there is nothing to me.

I don't know if I can do what he wants. When it terrifies me, when it could hurt others, can I do it?

And that was, perhaps, the main question he had to answer, though he had assumed it would be about what Draco wanted. And he couldn't answer it all at once. Harry took the memory out of the Pensieve, put it back into his own head, and went away to think.

Cupressus stood in one of the windows of the new Ministry and closed his eyes.

He could never have done this in the old building. For one thing, that had been underground, far away from the presence of wind and sun that made this one so beautiful, so full of the light and the Light. For another, all the windows had shown false visions, and not the real ones of sky and air and shimmering rainbow wards.

And, finally, that building had been heavy and old with corruption. Cupressus knew the corruption could enter into the new Ministry, too, along with those wizards and witches who would seek to recreate the old order here, but at least they had a chance to discourage it from ever seeding, instead of having to rip it out root and branch.

He turned away from the window and walked into the office that had been set up for him. The walls were decorated with portraits taken from his home, three of them showing his ancestors and one a Muggleborn witch who had turned to the Dark and been the fiercest opponent of the Apollonis line at the turn of the century. Cupressus thought it best to keep his enemies close, as well as to remind himself that just because someone was of the Dark didn't mean that that person was weak or corrupt.

He nodded at Black Jennifer, who just scowled at him and turned her back to stroke the white cat she'd been painted with, and then sat down at his desk. Before him was the first, and most worrying, batch of correspondence: people wanting to know whom

they should contact for a job in the Ministry, and accusing Cupressus of holding all the good jobs for himself.

Cupressus gave a thin smile. If they once understood how much arguing went on inside Hope for Light, they would not be accusing him of that.

But he could not help the public perception of the new Ministry by any means than answering and countering the criticism. He slit open the first envelope, and watched, completely unsurprised, as bubotuber pus poured out. He had recognized it from the smell. His enemies would have to be more subtle than that.

He realized his smile had grown more genuine as he thought of the challenges ahead, and didn't try to fight it.

Black Jennifer gave an audible sniff and mouthed a Dark curse at him when he looked in her direction.

"The blessing of the Light on you," Cupressus returned, and began writing an answer to the first letter, politely informing Mortimer Belville that the bubotuber pus had stained his letter so badly that Cupressus couldn't make it out, and, besides that, the Ministry was not in the business of making job offers to traitorous Squibs.

Harry looked around. Regulus had said that venturing into the world of this painting would affect him strongly, but so far Harry had seen nothing that might do so. The trees above him were black and bare, as though winter had come early here. The ground was like iron, but there was no trace of snow. In front of Harry, a stone path rambled on for a few paces before it sputtered and disappeared as broken rocks among the tree-roots.

And then the world turned sideways.

Harry struggled and scrambled for a hold on the tree-trunks nearest him. He was standing where he was supposed to be, his brain reassured him, even as his eyes tried to tell him he should be falling. He could handle this. His magic crackled around him as Harry fought to adjust his visual perception so that he could still be alert.

And then a golden, monkey-like creature leaped to the edge of a branch along/above him and down/across the air at him.

Harry was starting to see why Regulus had sent him into this Black painting when he said he wanted to test his magic.

Harry sent his magic springing out to catch the monkey in a net of white lightning, but failed. He'd sent the light in the wrong direction, he realized a moment later, when he ended up on his back with the monkey on top of him, trying to bite his throat. His magic hadn't compensated enough to truly adjust to the way he viewed the world.

So it would have to compensate *more*.

Harry envisioned new muscles growing above his arms, spreading into the net, holding the monkey still with main strength. He didn't think he could hurt it, not and maintain the title of *vates*; this might be the magical creature of a strange world, but it was still a magical creature, and probably the one who had managed to disorient him this way, rather than the whole world of the painting changing. That it slipped through his net again and again just meant he had to try harder.

He could feel the pleasure and satisfaction flowing under his skin as the magic flowed; it liked being used. It liked being taken out from under the barriers and set free in the world, much as the Many snakes had rejoiced at being free of their web.

Is that what Draco wants of me?

It was an interesting question, but one that he had no time to think on as the monkey-creature turned the whole painting-world completely upside-down, and Harry's mind started screaming that he should fall towards what now resembled the floor of a canyon. But he spread part of his magic in a blinding hood over his eyes, and this time concentrated on the image of the monkey freezing into a statue. It would still have its flesh, its fur, its blood and bone—he didn't intend to turn it into stone or ice—but it would have to be *still*.

And then it was, because the magic willed it to be, and they hung there a moment more before Harry found himself on his back under the upright trees, panting, his head aching from how hard he'd fallen. The monkey sat on his chest, its teeth poised a few inches from his throat.

Harry coughed dryly and sat up. When he turned, he saw Regulus behind him, grinning through the doorway in the air that the

portrait frame made.

“I trust that you had a good test?” he asked.

Harry smiled. “Yes. Thank you.” His magic was content again, rumbling and stretching around him like a great cat, and bouncing in his muscles as if to say *What are we going to do next?* The scope of the task was important—it couldn’t be easy—but this wasn’t nearly as hard as building the new Ministry had been. Harry was coming to think that it really just wanted *new* things to do, more than daring or heroic things. It wanted to be free and have its will accommodated, if not completely bent to.

Like Draco?

The thought would have to come later, as he had some of the more reluctant Light families to meet with now.

Snape looked up as someone rattled the locked door of his potions lab. The wards he’d put on the door sparked and whispered and carried back an image of the person who stood outside it to him. It was Regulus, and he clutched a spindly green plant that happened to be fairies’ breath, the very ingredient that would serve best in the new potion Snape was trying to brew: a truth serum without the drawbacks of Veritaserum, such as the mental haze which identified it to its victim at once.

“I am busy,” he called, pitching his voice for impressive effect.

“I know that you’re in there, Severus,” Regulus said, as if he had heard neither the voice nor the numerous requests Snape had made over the weeks for Regulus not to call him by his first name. “And I have a gift for you. I don’t think your potion can go much further, anyway, not without this gift.”

Snape ground his teeth. It was true, though, that he needed either fairies’ breath or some other plant that resembled it very closely to stabilize and sweeten the brew, and none of the others he’d looked up so far were common, or, for that matter, grew in Britain. Trust Regulus to have access to either a potting or a mysterious Black garden that would contain the exact kind of plant he needed.

“You may have five minutes,” he said, and lowered the wards, and opened the door.

Regulus stepped in, looking around admiringly as though he had never seen the potions lab before. He paused, staring hard at one lower shelf. Snape looked at it, but couldn’t see anything remarkable about the way he’d arranged the vials there.

“You moved the red potion,” Regulus said. “The one that looked like blood with light glowing through it. Did you use it as an ingredient, or was that something that someone drank?”

Snape stared at him. *How in the world does he know the contents of my lab that well?*

And he knew the answer, and he hated the answer, and he was uncomfortable with the answer. Regulus was interested in him, so therefore he paid attention to the details that surrounded Snape, including the details of his surroundings. It was more than even Harry usually did, if only because he tended to be preoccupied with his own thoughts.

It terrified Snape.

“Neither,” he snapped. “I moved it to the top shelf.” Regulus looked up at the top shelf and started to arch his eyebrows in polite disagreement, but Snape cut in before he could note the obvious lie. “Give me the fairies’ breath, since that’s what you came here to give me.”

Regulus snapped his gaze over to him, grinning. Snape couldn’t see why, until Regulus murmured, “That’s far from the only thing I’d like to give you,” and he realized he’d handed Regulus a perfect straight line.

“I do not understand,” Snape said, with all the cold, understated dignity in the world, “why you must do this.” He accepted the plant from Regulus, and rubbed it against the cauldron’s brim, shaving off several of the leaves. They fell into the potion, crinkling from the intense heat, and partially browning from it as well. Snape picked up the steel rod that he would normally use to stir, thought a moment, and then used the rod to stab and pick up one of the leaves, removing it from the liquid. Five was probably one too many. He set the stem with the rest of the leaves aside, because he didn’t need it right now. “There are others you could pursue, Regulus, should you decide that your loneliness needs to be relieved by companionship. I am far from your only choice, but I am the only one who will not be fond of you in return.”

“I don’t want them,” said Regulus comfortably, and leaned against the table on which he’d placed the fairies’ breath, now and then twirling the stem. Snape clenched his jaw against the impulse to tell him to stop playing with it. Regulus would manage to turn that into a joke, too, he was sure. “I want you. And I love you. I don’t love them. So that does make you rather my only good choice, you see.”

Snape finished the last counterclockwise stirring motion he needed to make, and laid the rod carefully down on the table. Then he turned to face Regulus, and said, “I do wish that you would give up this pretense.”

That at least set Regulus back on his heels, but he blinked, having the gall to act as if he didn’t understand. “Pretense?”

“That you—find me worth pursuing.” Snape still could not bring himself to use Regulus’s ridiculous word, because that would be giving credence to something he thought should not be given credence to. “It is not true. It does you no credit to claim that it is.”

Regulus snorted. “You’re an expert on many things, Severus, including potions. But I don’t think that you have any right to tell me what’s impossible and what’s not impossible when it comes to my own emotions.” He reached out as if he would touch Snape’s cheek, and Snape ducked his hand.

“This is childish,” he said, because that ought to get Regulus’s attention if nothing else did. “We are both grown men, and you endured years of torture for doing what you believed to be right. You should be above such silly tricks as convincing yourself that you are in love with me, and then trying to convince me of the same.”

“I don’t joke,” Regulus said softly, and the teasing had vanished from his face, and Snape couldn’t look at what was left. “Severus —“

Snape waved his wand in a complicated motion, and Regulus found himself set outside the lab, with the door locked and warded against him. Snape turned back to his brewing. He wouldn’t permit himself the soundproofing wards he wanted to set up. For one thing, they wouldn’t let him hear *anything* from outside the lab, cries for help from Harry included, but far more important, they would be an admission of weakness, and he was not about to allow that into his life.

He heard the knocks and the calls, but he forced himself to ignore them, and after a time they went away. The tremors in his hands that prevented him from brewing faded within five minutes.

Harry glanced around nervously. The meeting with the reluctant Light families had gone well, for a certain sense of “well.” They still weren’t satisfied with one of the new Ministry’s basic requirements, which was that there be a good proportion of non-human representation on the Wizengamot. They argued that, since so many old Wizengamot members had survived the Ministry’s collapse, replacing or adding to them was superfluous.

Harry had hinted, as delicately as he could, about the southern goblins and their control over Gringotts, the centaurs who had said they would fight for him, the Many snakes only he could talk to and whose poison in the eyes couldn’t be cured, the northern goblins who owed him a debt, and the enormous power of freed house elves. That had been enough to shut a few of them up, and others had started agreeing that it might be no bad thing to allow a few of the goblins and centaurs, at least, into the replacement for Courtroom Ten.

Then they had left, and now Harry was alone, in a room on Silver-Mirror’s second floor too small and oddly-shaped, with close-crowding octagonal walls, to make a good bedroom. It *had* been a study, but when more people started attending their strategy meetings, they’d had to move their meetings to a bigger room anyway. So Harry was standing now in a room of solid stone with the Black wards on watch in case anyone came up the stairs. Surely he could be alone here if he could be alone anywhere in Silver-Mirror.

So it was only his own fear that held him back.

Harry swallowed. He wished he could have Connor with him, and that Connor could drink the Switching Potion to take Harry’s emotional barriers away for a little while. His brother would have done it, and cheerfully. Harry knew how to brew the damn thing now, and respect the restrictions, such as the person who drank the first half of the potion not being able to drink any other potions for five minutes after that draft, and having to drink absolutely no more than half.

But it would have been a cheat. He had to get used to dropping his emotional barriers on his own, and not fearing what would come out, if he was to get close to Draco and heal the biggest emotional sore between them.

Just—

Just that, he was terrified of doing this, because in the past, bad things had always emerged. Fury. Insanity. Hatred.

He told his magic to watch and guard, in the end. No matter what might come forth from his mouth and eyes while he tried this experiment, no one could come through a solid barrier of his power and get hurt. The magic, still in a good mood from the way he'd treated it earlier, purred in agreement and then turned the door of the room into what looked like another stone wall with pure power. Harry nodded, and closed his eyes, and sat down so he wouldn't fall down.

Then he began.

This was the opposite of the procedures he'd gone through before, when he sank his emotions in Occlumency pools or froze them as ice, so that he could get through an ordinary day without inconvenient feelings ambushing him. Now he envisioned a hot sun shining in his mind, turning the Occlumency pools to drifting magical vapor. He shivered as a sensation brushed over his skin like cool mist, and then dissipated. And he was left with his emotions high and dry, for the moment.

It felt—well, like a punch to the gut, really. Harry doubled over, gasping. His magic stirred near the door, but he told it sternly that he was in no danger and forbade it to come to him. It settled back on its haunches, cocking its head like a great dog, and watched him closely. Harry was sure that it would arrange to interfere if it *did* think he was in danger.

Meanwhile, he tumbled through a huge cascade of tiny emotions, which popped up, pricked him like pins, and then vanished back into his mind. His face flushed with irritation and paled with hurt, so regularly he could feel the blood coming and going like a tide in his cheeks. He felt mild humor and tenderness and exasperation and interest and indifference and—

Merlin, how did ordinary people get through the day, feeling like this? It was the same sick-making sensation he'd had yesterday when he realized that he wasn't going to be able to stop himself from snapping at Draco, given that Connor had taken his emotional barriers with him. Harry had *rules*. He knew how things worked when the pureblood rituals were with him, and his Occlumency. And this, this sea of chaos, frightened him.

Yet if he closed himself behind the barriers again, he stood a chance of losing Draco. And anything was better than that, except possibly the loss of Connor.

He gasped and hissed and waited for the flux of emotions to subside. He only grew truly worried when minute after minute passed and they didn't.

Gnawing his lip, Harry thought, *I know that people like Connor and Draco must live this way, since they don't know Occlumency and they never had my training. But Snape doesn't; he uses his pools to close off the emotions that might incapacitate him if he had to live with them from day to day. Why does no one ever care about the way that he uses his emotions, but they care about the way I use mine?*

His cheeks turned red again with the flow of irritation, and he winced when he realized he was grinding his teeth. *Is this really what Draco wants me to do? Is this what he wants from me?*

The memory he'd sent into the Pensieve that morning suggested that not only did Draco want that from him; he wanted *other things like that* from Harry. A giving of himself, where "himself" didn't include magic and patience and love, all of which Harry had assumed would make Draco happy. Little things, unimportant things, or at least things that didn't matter that much to Harry, though he could respect them as mattering to other people.

Why?

Burying his head against his knees as he gratefully restored his Occlumency pools, Harry knew he would make no progress forward until he was able to figure out the reason why.

"And you just—decided that you were going to change one day?" Michael stared at Connor in evident disbelief. "How do you *do* that? I've tried, and it's hard. I say that I'm not going to say something stupid when I see your brother or Draco, and I try, but then it doesn't work."

Connor smiled and traced his fingers over the kitchen table, through the wet mark that someone's cup of pumpkin juice had left

there. “It was hard,” he said. “The hardest thing that I’ve ever done in my life. The trick is not to mind the difficulty.”

Michael bit his lip and shook his head. “I’m not sure that I understand.”

“Think of it as—like a heavy load,” said Connor, returning to a metaphor that Remus had given him, and which Peter had refined during the summer they spent together in Lux Aeterna. “You’re a mule, and you’re pulling a cart filled with rocks up steep mountain trails. You *have* to keep on moving. You can’t let yourself tip backwards, or the weight of the cart will catapult you down the mountain, and that would kill you. And you can’t stop pulling until you get to the summit, because people are counting on you to pull this. So you set your muscles, and you tug, and you heave, and you strain, and you sweat. And you keep pulling, because *that’s* the way forward. There’s no way forward that’s not difficult.” He shrugged, somewhat embarrassed by the awe in Michael’s eyes. “So you get used to the difficulty. The weight never goes away, but it gets less important.”

“It’s so hard, though, with my own twin ignoring me,” Michael whispered.

“Harry did that to me in the beginning of fourth year,” Connor said calmly, “until I was chosen for the Tri-Wizard Tournament and he *had* to worry about me. But I understood. He’d always been devoted to me, and then he found out that that was wrong, and so he gave more of his time to Draco. It was like a recoiling. And I hadn’t been very nice to him the year before, about Sirius. Things *had* to change, and that meant things were strained between me and him for a little while.”

“My brother’s ignored me for a lot longer than that,” Michael whined. “And for things that aren’t my fault, either, for mistakes that I *haven’t* made.”

“I thought you fancied Draco?” Connor raised an eyebrow and nobly refrained from commenting that he couldn’t see how anyone in the world would fancy Draco. *Love*, yes; that was the only emotion that would make someone put up with the arrogant prat, and it was perfectly obvious to Connor that Harry felt it. But fancying wasn’t strong enough to get someone past the cast-iron irritating shell, surely.

“You can’t choose who you fancy.” Michael crossed his arms and put on a superior look.

“But you can choose to approach them about it, and flirt with them over it,” said Connor. *These are lessons that he should have known already.* “You shouldn’t have done that. And then you’ve made things worse by blaming Harry—“

“You don’t think it’s his *fault*?”

“No,” said Connor. “I think it’s yours, for making more of this than you needed to make of it, and I think it’s Draco’s, for first encouraging you and then nearly choking you to death when he should have let you down more gently. And maybe it’s Harry’s fault for keeping you on as a sworn companion as long as he did, but another part of getting people to forgive you is to blame them for the *right* reasons. He’s not the one who made you fancy Draco.”

“He never pays as much attention to him as he should,” Michael said softly, clenching his fists. “He still doesn’t. And he doesn’t pay attention to the little people, either, the ones like my mother and sister who depended on him for protection.”

“If you insult my brother, I won’t help you,” Connor told him.

Michael looked up, eyes wide in what seemed like betrayal. “I thought you wanted to be my friend?”

“Yes, but so far you haven’t done anything worthy of being called a friend.” Connor rose to his feet, giving him a cool look. “You have to change so that other people will *like* you, too, you know.”

He left the kitchen, and Michael gaped after him.

Harry paused. He’d come into the kitchen to make himself some toast, but Draco was the only other person in the room, and Harry had avoided being alone with him since their fight.

Sure enough, Draco turned around from putting away the jug of milk, saw him, and immediately bristled.

“Have you decided anything important yet?” His voice was steady and paper-thin as the set of Black knives meant to slice expensive fruit that Regulus had shown Harry and admitted no one in the family had used in the last hundred years.

“One important thing,” Harry said, keeping his emotional barriers up and locked tight. Now wasn’t the time to let them down. It would be false to end the argument when he still didn’t know how to give Draco what he wanted. And more yelling was—not right. “Not the others.”

Draco’s mouth puckered as if he’d swallowed a lemon. “This is one thing I hate about you,” he said, softly, viciously. “Always so controlled. As if you can’t bear to step off your pedestal and engage in petty anger like the rest of us mortals.”

“I thought you hated it when I got angry,” said Harry. His rage and his sorrow were great enough that he could feel his barriers buckling, and this time there was no Connor and no Switching Potion to save him. *Damn it.* He stepped backward, prepared to retreat. He couldn’t solve the argument yet, so what was the point of making it fester further?

Draco crossed the kitchen so quickly that he left Harry blinking against what seemed to be a dazzle of afterimages. His glass of milk sloshed as he seized Harry’s arm with his free hand and drew him close. This near, Harry could see the lines where his teeth were clenched inside his cheeks, and smell him, the scent of sweat and rage and excitement.

“I hate it with you withdraw from me, treat me like a piece of furniture, treat me like I’m *not there*,” Draco said. “That’s what I hate. And you’re doing it again, handling me like a child.”

“But you also hate it when I get angry,” Harry said, and, damn it, his own voice was rising. He had never known anyone else who could do this to him when he intended to keep calm. Not even Connor’s ridiculous provocations about Slytherins in third year had managed it. He looked sideways and hissed between his teeth. “I’m trying to understand what you want, I’m trying to give it to you, but I can’t—“

His head reeled back. Draco had tried to punch him. Given the angle at which he stood, though, his blow landed somewhere between a backhand and a slap.

Harry *snarled*.

His magic broke free from him and galloped around Draco’s legs, binding them in yellow manacles. Draco tried to move, toppled over, and had to catch himself on the kitchen table. His eyes were wide with shock as he stared down at his legs.

“Is this what you want?” Harry hissed, stalking around him. “For me to come close to *hating* you because you won’t give me a straight answer? For me to want you to *shut up*, do *anything* but keep talking? For me to wish that I’d rather be a bird than a human, if being human means dealing with you?”

“Yes.”

Harry blinked, caught more off-guard by that than by the strike. Draco’s eyes were intent on him now, and Draco was leaning forward, at least as much as he could with his legs locked together like a pillar.

“At least now you’re seeing me,” Draco whispered.

Harry moved his hand like a blade, cutting through the bonds, and then turned and walked away, his hunger forgotten. His magic and his anger beat in him like twin pulses, and the grand plan he’d worked out—to find what Draco wanted and give it to him—was forgotten in the onslaught of the need to *fight*, to scream and yell and *hurt* Draco.

He hated that impulse in himself. It was a cousin of the pleasure he took in inflicting pain on his enemies, and, likewise, not one he wanted to indulge.

Draco moved his legs cautiously, then touched his hand and winced. His knuckles had collided with Harry’s cheek, yes, but awkwardly; he’d skinned them. It certainly hadn’t made Harry wear the badge of righteous anger he’d imagined when he struck him.

But it had been worth it, both the physical pain and the emotional pain that washed around the center of his chest like warm water carrying chunks of ice.

Harry had been focused *solely* on him. He hadn’t been holding back and treating him as if Draco were fragile and had to be left behind, out of battle, or as if Draco could never see the depths of him because he would think they were frightening or evil. He’d said exactly what he thought for a moment, rather than tempering his words to suit Draco’s grief, Draco’s mood, and the political

needs of the moment. He'd *looked*, and *seen*, and *felt*, and *heard*.

It hadn't lasted, of course. The acknowledgement of that need to have Harry look at him had made Harry back up and run.

Draco smiled. He didn't think it was a nice smile, or even a happy one, at least to someone looking at him from outside. That hardly mattered. Harry hadn't hidden himself behind ice walls after all, the way Draco had worried he would manage to after their argument. He wasn't perfectly controlled, and that meant Draco was more *in* control. He'd begun to think of Harry almost as a statue, someone who could always do the right thing—by his lights—and who had a schedule for times when he talked to Draco, times when he talked to his brother, times when he fought the war or planned the attack on the next Horcrux, and times when he had sex with Draco. And then he'd managed to pierce Harry's perfect little shell twice in two days.

Harry wasn't perfect. He could still come apart at the seams. He could still do stupid things, wrong things. He could still be irritated.

And he would probably be pushed to the breaking point, soon.

Draco could wait a bit longer. He would provoke if he had to, but really, he would prefer Harry to lose control on his own.

Harry sat on the roof of Silver-Mirror with his eyes closed. Around him, snow settled with a slow, heavy finality.

Tears stung and burned his eyes. He hated that. His chest heaved as if he were going to shout or cry at any moment. He *hated* that. He wanted to find someone else, like Connor, and scream at him about the unfairness of the universe in general. He *really* hated that.

Of course the universe was unfair. He'd always known that. What good would complaining about it do?

Of course, he couldn't stay the same he'd always been, and change was a part of life, as he'd explained to Draco so pompously a few days before, never-ending. He hadn't expected to find it so hard, when he knew it so well.

Harry gave in to one impulse, and tucked his head under a folded arm like a bird under its wing when it sheltered from the cold.

He would have to—to break. The image reared in his mind as a cliff he would need to fall down, and hope to Merlin that he was still alive, or at least in a number of closely-scattered pieces, when he reached the bottom.

But he couldn't just yet, because they were going after Ravenclaw's wand in two days' time.

Two kinds of necessities tore at him, and because he didn't think that he could stop them right now, Harry sat there and let them—hating himself all the while for weakness, and near to hating Draco for his part in this, and hating the world for being the way it was.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Starlit Meetings With Evan Rosier

Henrietta stood comfortably under the bare boughs of the trees. Evan had sent her a description of the Apparition location in his latest letter; she had gone even though it could be a trap. She was fairly sure, at least, that he would not try to make her arrive at a place that didn't exist and Splinch herself. That would not be bloody enough, nor satisfying enough, for him.

She stood a little straighter as a shadow moved at the far edge of the grove. The copse was of pines, which meant it still bore greenery this late in the year, and the needles on the ground concealed the sounds of Evan's feet as he walked. For all that, Henrietta had no doubt it was him as she watched him come past the two outer circles of trees into the innermost one. It *would* be.

He wore a ragged dark cloak starred with snow, and he held a knife in one hand. Henrietta eyed the knife approvingly. It was dark, and so did not show much blood—obsidian. The hilt was silver, which she found a touch dramatic, but then, one could hardly accuse Evan of being balanced and sane.

“Greetings,” she said, and watched her breath foam on the air in front of her.

“Henrietta.” He walked so delicately, she thought, lifting and lowering his feet like a moorhen trying to pick her way through

puddles of water. “I suppose that you find it funny to write to me of Venus and Tannhäuser? I know you are not Venus. You do not keep a hill, and you do not answer the call of your own desire.” His eyes met hers, blueberry-dark, but blackberry-shining. He was not amused, she saw. “You have a master. What he requires of you, you do.”

“Evan,” Henrietta whispered, and knelt, flinging back her long hair from her neck. She felt a snowflake settle in the hollow of her throat, and had to close her eyes at the sensation. It felt so much like a knife-blade. “I serve no master. I am not a *tame* Slytherin. He who thinks he has me tame to hand would be well-advised to watch out, lest I turn like a serpent and bite him.”

He was silent, watching her.

“If you really think I am a pawn and no more,” Henrietta whispered, “cut my throat, now. You can, after all.”

Evan moved a few quick steps forward, so that he stood just before her. Henrietta gazed up at him fearlessly. She knew that, if he killed her now, all her plans would be for naught. But as she felt the cold pressing against her and the blood beating behind the fragile shield of her skin, she did not care.

The knife came down to rest on her collarbone. Henrietta turned her head and kissed the hilt. The cold made the metal cling to her lips for a long time before Evan pulled the blade away.

“You would let me,” Evan said.

Henrietta listened carefully. *Yes*. His voice was steadier than it had been, just as the madness behind his eyes had receded. He had been in decline when she met him in the Forbidden Forest last year. He no longer was. He had changed, and she knew the source of that change. When she looked up, there was someone else behind his eyes.

She was not wrong. She could not be wrong, because she was not.

“Yes,” she said.

Nothing about her was a lie. She was fearless, and he knew it, and something in him feared her fearlessness.

But the rest, the part of him that had been there when she raped him, was inexorably drawn, and he leaned down and kissed her, then took his knife and slit her lower lip open. Henrietta licked at the blood, and laughed.

He backed away, never taking his eyes off her, and Apparated just before he reached the pine trees.

Henrietta stretched her arms slowly, exultantly, over her head. Harry would never approve of what she was doing, but Harry would never know, until it was too late. She served no master.

Indigena could not shake the feelings that had overcome her lately. She stood shivering at the edge of her garden, and watched the snow drift down outside the wards, and knew that not all the Warming Charms in the world could make her complacent about heat again.

The world was a sheer black cliff, with broken rocks waiting for her at the bottom. If she fell down the cliff, she would die on the rocks, and she could not forbid that fate and she could not escape it.

She closed her eyes and thought of nothing for a moment, nauseous, dizzy.

When she opened her eyes, Evan Rosier stood at the edge of the garden.

Indigena stumbled back, and then stopped herself, though she shook. She would not flee from him. She had bargained with him before, and escaped with both her sanity and her life. And here she was strong, with the earth straining beneath her feet to be of use to her, and the thorns twitching in their sheaths on her backs.

She lifted them above her head, to make herself even stronger, and demanded, “Why are you here? What do you want?”

Evan stroked a knife he held, obsidian with a silver hilt, and didn’t respond. Indigena eyed the knife mistrustfully, wondering why it looked familiar. After a time, she knew. It was such a blade as her Lord had once described when lingering lovingly on torture techniques he’d used in Africa. It was used to joint enemies, to cut out their bones so that the flesh might be more easily made

tender and thrown on the fire.

Indigena looked back at Evan's face. And he was smiling sideways, as he usually did, but there was something else in his eyes.

"Where did you get that?" she whispered. "How did you know that?"

"You will never know," he said. His voice had deepened and coarsened, and Indigena could hear an echo in it if she listened. "You will never know because the hound is in the way, and then there is only one of us left. I intend to be the one standing. Take my brother, and welcome to him."

"I have no idea what you mean," said Indigena, and then wondered why she'd said it. It was a ridiculous thing to say. Besides, she had long since decided that she couldn't decipher Evan Rosier's madness, unless she herself had set the plan in motion.

"Of course you do not," said Evan, and his face wrinkled into a smile that was almost kind. "You have not lived in his flesh."

He turned and vanished. Indigena stood there, and wondered if she should go below and tell her Lord about this. But he would still be in a trance, working hard on the one plan that would slowly snare Harry by the equinox without unnecessarily risking more of his power or resources.

And when Indigena turned around, there was a black dog at the other end of the garden.

Watching her, the dog lifted her head in a soundless howl. Indigena had no doubt it was a bitch, though how she knew that was not open to her. The fact simply arrived in her skull as if pushed there like a brick, and then the dog paced along the edge of the garden, watching her all the while with bright silver eyes, and leaped, and vanished into starlight and snow.

And Indigena understood that it might not make much of a difference at all, what she knew, or where she stood, or what thorns she had growing out of her back.

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Chapter Sixty-Four: In Night's Poisoned Garden

Harry looked slowly around the kitchen. No matter how he looked, though, the view never changed. The people standing around him and staring at him still stayed the same, and so did what they carried.

Peter, Regulus, and Snape stood slightly apart from the others, near each other. They were the ones who would have to enter Indigena's garden, after all, thanks to that Unassailable Curse that forbade anyone who didn't bear a Dark Mark from coming in. Each of them carried numerous vials of the antivenin that Snape had brewed, once Thomas, Neville, and Hawthorn had declared which poisonous plants they thought most likely grew there, and which hybrids. Peter's face was nervous, pale, with a slight sheen of sweat on the forehead. Snape, of course, disdained to show such weakness. Regulus now and then glanced with affectionate anxiety at Snape, though Harry could see Snape was tensing himself to ignore those looks.

Draco stood behind him, so close that Harry could feel his heat through his clothes, but not trying to touch him. He had announced that he wanted to go to the garden, though he would be unable to do much but stand outside the wall with Harry and wait for the moment when Peter, Regulus, and Snape uncovered the Horcrux. His eyes had dared Harry to say no. Harry had just raised his eyebrows and asked why he *wouldn't* be going along. Draco had looked flummoxed for a moment, and Harry had taken the chance to squeeze his hand.

They would get there. Not today, but they would get there. The black mountain wall, smooth as glass, loomed in Harry's mind, waiting for him.

"Harry?"

He shook his head, blinked a bit, and looked up. Regulus had turned to regard him, with enough kindness to prove that he didn't just see Snape as part of his world. Harry nodded to him to say what was on his mind.

"Are we ready?"

Harry rubbed tense hands over his robes, slicking the sweat from them. Of course, more sweat covered them in seconds, but he tried to ignore that, just as he tried to concentrate on something other than the fact that, if they uncovered the wand, someone would still have to die to break the Unassailable Curse on it.

He nodded. "We're ready. Let's go."

He was very careful, as they moved out of Silver-Mirror and prepared to Apparate to Thornhall, to keep from seeming as if he were stepping in front of Draco to defend him. He wouldn't do that anyway right now, since there was nothing here to protect him from, but he was relearning the value of small things.

Peter felt the tingle of magic as he, Regulus, and Severus stepped through the arched entrance of the garden. Part of that was the Warming Charms and other spells that enabled these plants to survive in the middle of winter, of course, but the largest part would be the Unassailable Curse, noting that everyone who stepped through the arch had a Dark Mark on his arm.

Actually, Peter was a bit surprised that Regulus could pass. When he turned, he saw Regulus rolling back his sleeve to study the Grim on his skin. He shrugged, then looked up and met Peter's eyes.

"I suppose that she wants me to come in here," he said quietly. "Or perhaps Indigena wasn't specific with the wording, and the spell counts anyone who once bore a Dark Mark as welcome."

Peter nodded, then turned away. He couldn't speculate on Lady Death's motives. He couldn't speculate on anyone's motives but his own, in fact. And he knew that he had nerved himself to die as the sacrifice for the wand. No one else was going to take that from him.

His armpits were damp, and his breath came and went in fast pants. It was not that he truly *wanted* to die. But his life was required in the service of something larger than himself. So it went.

The garden ahead of them creaked and rustled softly. The nearest plants were made of long, thin, black thorns, but some still had leaves, dark green and shiny as holly. When Peter listened, his ears tried to make voices out of the rubbing of the foliage. He shook his head and told himself sternly just to listen for the bell-sounds and music that might signal some of the rarer, more magical plants.

"We're separating?" he asked Severus and Regulus, nodding to the two paths that wound away from them, one to the left and one to the right. They were of identical width, and both made of crushed gray stones and white sand.

Regulus frowned. "I don't think that's a good idea. If one of us finds the wand, the others would need to be able to come to him as soon as possible. And this might be a maze, or we might have to force our way through plants that would kill us." He touched the vials of antivenin in the pocket of his robe.

Peter gnawed his lip. "On the other hand," he said, "I know what the ash wood the wand is evidently made of smells like. And as a rat, I could fit through the human-sized traps more easily than you could."

"But the plants might stab at any movement," said Severus, folding his arms around himself as if he were cold, and moving away from Regulus when he held a hand out. "Small or large, if you move around their roots, they could strike."

"Or they might not," said Peter, as patiently as possible. "We don't *know*, remember? That's the perilous part about coming into this garden like this." He nodded to the left-hand path. "I could take that one, for example, and become a rat, and try to find the wand and dig it out. And then I could drag it back. You could explore the rest of the garden. If you found it, you could shout for me. I'd hear you."

Regulus and Severus exchanged glances. Peter could see that the plan appealed to both of them, though for different reasons. Severus had forgotten about the practical advantages that Peter's Animagus form could give him; Regulus wanted to stay near Severus, whom Peter hoped would crack soon. It was becoming painful to watch them dance around each other.

I might never be alive to see that cracking.

It was hard, learning to live with the consciousness and foreknowledge of death.

"I suppose we can do it," Severus said. He seemed to loathe being left alone with Regulus, but he had never been one to deny good sense, and Peter knew that his plan sounded like the sheerest good sense.

"Good," said Peter. "As I said, call for me if you find it. I'll bring the wand, if I find it, to the meeting of these paths." And he

changed before either of them could start arguing, for any reason.

The world collapsed around him, and then loomed, the way it always did. Peter sniffed, and his nostrils filled with a world of scents he could never imagine living without while he was a rat, but which he was used to losing again, the moment he became human. He skipped forward, paws skittering lightly across the roots of the large thorns, and vanished into the world of the undergrowth.

The ground rippled up and down beneath his feet, tiny mounds of good digging dirt and dipping thorns that would make a burrow uncomfortable, leaves that stank of cat fur and ones that smelled clean and tasty, flowers that Peter's instincts insisted were out of season and darkness that would make an excellent shelter from the reaching paws of felines. Peter took note of the fact, however, that no rats or mice or other burrowing creatures had been burrowing or eating. That was a bad sign. No matter how pleasant the country, if someone didn't live here already, Peter would not have wanted the plants for neighbors.

He shook off the ratty thoughts and lifted his head, flaring his nostrils and twitching his whiskers, concentrating on the smell of ash wood. He did think he sniffed a faint trace of it to the left, and altered his trail, ducking and weaving around the bases of several thornbushes that swayed, but didn't try to stab him.

Already, he was wondering if he should actually take himself back to the crossing of trails if and when he found the wand. Perhaps it would be better to kill himself where it lay, so that neither Severus nor Regulus could argue, or try to make himself the sacrifice. Peter wanted them to live and enjoy each other's company. And Harry was waiting on the other side of the wall, his connection to Voldemort open as much as he dared. In the best case scenario, he would appreciate a warning when the Horcrux was made vulnerable, so that he could start swallowing the magic and the shard of Tom Riddle inside, but Peter was also sure he could sense it.

Maybe—maybe—

Of course, all that depended on him being the one to find the wand in the first place. Along with the smell of ash wood, Peter applied himself to looking for any sign of recent digging.

Snape ducked as a whistling branch, spiked with thorns like nails, swung above him and crashed into the bush on the other side of the path. He shivered, impressed. The sheer strength of the thing argued that it couldn't be stopped by conventional means, and Rhangnara and Hawthorn had warned them that burning some of the plants in Indigena's garden might have a chance to release poisonous fumes.

Still, it was easy enough to cast a spell across his face so that he wouldn't breathe in the fumes, then cast *Incendio* on the plant. The long branch, coming around for another strike, writhed like a beheaded snake and died in the flames. Regulus, on the other side of it, uttered a breathless laugh.

"Not so strong, are they, Severus?"

Snape tightened his jaw and tramped through the ashes to join Regulus on the continuing trail. So far, they had faced a plant covered with flute-like flowers that tried to sing to them and lull them to sleep, numerous thorns, a series of vines that crawled along at ground level to snare their ankles and trip them, a tree that nearly tricked them into walking into a crack in the trunk, and now this. Snap would not say that their opponents so far had been *weak*.

And there had been no sign of Ravenclaw's wand, no sign of its being buried or stuck obligingly in the crook of a bough. Snape was beginning to believe that Peter would stand a better chance of finding it after all.

When he looked up, Regulus was using his wand to poke at a large shrub covered with shiny leaves and dark purple flowers. Snape hissed under his breath. *This is only another reason he shouldn't be let out without a minder.* He stuck out his wand and pushed Regulus's away from the shrub. "What do you think you're *doing*?" he snapped.

Regulus made wide, innocent eyes at him. "Severus," he said, in a deliberate whinge. "I just saw what I thought was a wand in there." He nodded to a stem that had the same length and thickness as a wand, if one were drunk. "I was trying to knock it down without disturbing the bush, that's all."

Snape wanted to say, "A likely story," but that was too predictable, and he wanted to tell Regulus to stop calling him Severus, but it wasn't as if the man ever listened anyway. "Regulus—"

And then Regulus let out a sharp breath and took a step forward, ignoring the way that the flowers reared up and flared like reaching arms with tendrils, as if they would pull him close, lock their blossoms over his face, and drain the life from him. “*Severus*,” he breathed. The teasing had vanished from his voice. “Look.”

And so Snape did, and he saw the small mound of dirt at the foot of the purple-flowered bush, with a figure worked on the top of it. The figure *could* have been a raven with wide-spread wings. Or it could have been another bird. An eagle, perhaps, the symbol of Ravenclaw at Hogwarts.

“We don’t know that it means anything, Regulus,” he hissed, and shifted his wand from one hand to the other to calm his nerves. “She could have created several of them to serve as decoys if someone managed to make it this far. Or she could have wanted to make someone start seeing hints in shadows where there are none.”

Regulus ignored this sensible counsel, because it seemed that that was what he did. Instead, he knelt and used his wand to carefully brush away dirt from the top of the mound, disturbing the bird-like figure. Snape plunged his free hand into a robe pocket, searching for the vials of antivenin. This would be the point where a tendril came out of the mound and poisoned Regulus, he was certain.

But nothing happened, except the dirt breaking apart to reveal a wand beneath it. The wand was made of ash wood, and shimmered with a faint, dark line that Snape had seen before: crawling along the edge of the Sword of Gryffindor, and surrounding the ring that Harry had seized and broken.

Regulus looked up at Snape with triumph in his eyes. “We haven’t destroyed it yet,” he whispered. “And she probably has protections that will come to life if we try to move it. But the *true* defenses, the ones that Voldemort used, are probably broken. She had to move it out of its original hiding place in the orphanage, remember? I bet he had spells as formidable as Slytherin’s shade on them, but he had to remove them or tell her how to break them so she could go there and move the Horcrux.”

Snape couldn’t disagree with that line of reasoning. Lazuli Yaxley had kept a close watch on Thornhall when she could, and her shadow-mate and her sister Peridot had done the same when Lazuli was occupied. They would have noticed Indigena Apparating in constantly to adjust the defenses on the wand, and she had not. It seemed that Indigena had brought the wand here, trusted to the plants to protect it and later the Unassailable Curse, and had not bothered to build up the defenses.

“We can remove it. I’m not going to touch it, though,” Regulus whispered, and pointed his wand at Ravenclaw’s wand. “*Wingardium Leviosa!*”

The Horcrux floated into the air. Regulus gave Snape a triumphant look from half-lidded eyes.

Then vines lashed up from the ground, grabbing Regulus, binding him and bowing him backward, so that in moments he hung with his head pointed towards the dirt and his shoulders and limbs twisted at impossible angles. Snape barely kept himself from lunging forward with a snarl. Instead, he crouched beside Regulus and tried to figure out how to reverse the vines, which every second wound tighter, and bent his head towards his spine.

“I would not do that, traitor,” said Indigena Yaxley’s smooth voice from behind him.

Snape glanced coldly over his shoulder at her. She had stepped out from between two bushes, and had her own wand in her hand, pointed directly at him, as well as the thorns swaying above her shoulders. They could plunge down and yank his heart out of his chest, as Snape well knew. That was what had happened to Percy Weasley.

And she had Regulus.

Snape was astonished to find out how close he was to losing his self-control over this. He did not love Regulus. He knew that. He could not be loved. He knew that.

But Regulus was bound and straining at his feet, small crack by small crack, towards being completely broken, and he felt as if he were floating on a piece of pack ice in the middle of a flow of magma. The pack ice was his self-control.

He stood. Indigena raised an eyebrow, and the vines holding Regulus flexed and bent him further.

“If you attack me, or he struggles, he dies,” said Indigena softly. “They will literally rip him apart, snap his neck and his spine. Otherwise, his death will be slow and torturous, unless you hand Ravenclaw’s wand to me and leave this garden.” Her green-streaked hair had arisen to join the swaying of the thorns above her shoulders now.

“How do I know you would free Regulus if I left the garden?” Snape’s voice was a muted thing, just barely running ahead of the rage.

Indigena gave him a slow smile. “I have honor. You may trust me. Traitors have no honor.” Her eyes flicked to his left arm. “You were given a chance to resume your loyalty, and it did not happen. I am the one who is taking a risk by trusting you.” She paused, and when Snape didn’t move, added, “I am only interested in serving my Lord. I would have let you be if you had not found the wand, or attempted to remove it. I have been here since you first entered the garden. It is at my command that my darlings did not injure you more than they have so far.”

Snape felt sick. To know they had been watched all along, allowed to get this far only because the garden’s mistress had found them amusing...

And then the world changed.

A tremendous bay broke across the garden. It shuddered in the ground around them, in Snape’s bones, in the blood that coursed along his veins. He turned towards it, and that took more courage than it had ever taken him to do anything. All his instincts, the instincts of creatures once hunted by predators that had bellowed like that, were screaming at him to run, and keep running. The terrors of the vines ahead were nothing compared to the claws and teeth behind.

He saw an enormous hound, a true Grim of the kind that Sirius Black had only dreamed he could imitate, standing in a thicket ten feet away. Its eyes were as silver as the symbol in the center of Harry’s palm. Its fur was as black as the Mark on the inside of Regulus’s arm. As Snape watched, Lady Death raised her head and howled again, making him stumble to his knees.

Indigena gave a wordless, gibbering shriek beside him, as if the mere sight of the dog had frightened her too much to do anything.

And then she fell to her knees with another shriek as a gray rat bit her on the ankle, and Snape turned and saw what else had happened.

The bay had reminded him.

Come when I call, she had said, sitting on the throne in the desolate country, after she had given him the information about the Horcruxes. *Give me what I crave when I crave it. When I call you on to die, then you cannot refuse me.*

And now the call had come, the hunting bay that she had imitated for him when he asked.

Regulus closed his eyes. He had made the bargain, his life for knowledge, death for wisdom. At least he had lived long enough to learn what love was again, and choose an heir, and know that he was leaving the houses and treasures that had depended on him in capable hands.

He somewhat regretted that he had *not* lived long enough to see love returned, but that was not something he could expect, not with someone as stubborn as Severus was. It would have been worth it, to break those masks, had he had the time.

It had been worth it, to have lived as he was.

He dedicated his life to the destruction of the Horcrux, in one breath, and thought of Harry in the next.

And so, with love riding his mind, controlling his movements as it had from the day that he descended to the guarded cave and stole the locket Horcrux, Regulus Black wrenched himself backwards and sideways, and heard his bones snap like castanets in the moments before darkness took him.

The Dark was deep and soft, and rolled him in velvet blankets, and an enormous cold tongue, the tongue of a mother dog licking a puppy, scraped him from head to foot, and so he ended.

His second-to-last thought was of Harry, his last thought of Severus.

Regulus Black died content.

Harry reeled to the ground. It wasn't the scar in his head flaring with pain, the way he had thought it would be if Snape, Regulus, Peter, or all of them together managed to find the Horcrux and break the Unassailable Curse, but the silver dogs-head in the center of his left palm. The metal was cold, unbearably colder than the flesh around it, freeze-drying it as Harry watched.

“Harry! What—“ Draco was beside him, wrenching at his wrist.

Harry sucked a deep breath into his lungs and heard the dog crying, baying, barking as if down a trail. Regulus had said Lady Death would call him. From the sound of it, she just had.

He could not mourn. Not yet.

They stood on the northern side of the garden-wall, and now Harry leaned against it, trusting some of his weight to Draco, and opened the connection in his scar as wide as it would go, with a mental shout. If the pattern was followed that had occurred the other times Horcruxes were just destroyed, the shade of Tom Riddle would come forth now, and Harry *had* to keep him from possessing a body, had to draw him near enough that Harry could swallow his soul.

Come to me, Tom. It's the one you hate, your heir, the one who is going to be responsible for destroying your body in a very short time. You want to take me if you can, don't you, and use my own power against me? I've already destroyed three of you, and destroyed a fourth with help. This is the fifth. Don't you want to be the one who survives?

He could feel a cold presence in the garden moving closer and closer to him, and threw even more of himself into the call. He didn't entirely abandon the physical sensations of his body, though; he could still feel the chill in the center of his left palm, and Draco's hand, steady as rock, on his shoulder, and his warmth supporting Harry all along the right side.

Indigena could not stand. Every time she got herself steady enough to fire off a spell, the rat running about her nipped her again, stumbling her with the little shock of pain, and darting nimbly enough to escape the curses that she plunged into the dirt. She called a vine to take care of the rat, but the creature turned a somersault in midair, evading the reaching tendril neatly, and then bit her hand hard enough to make her drop her wand.

Add to that the instinctive terror of the dog's howl, and the fact that said dog *hadn't gone away*, but remained in the thicket, panting and watching her with cold silver eyes, and she could not get her bearings.

She knew Regulus Black was dead, and because she had not commanded the plants to kill him, or even tighten since she began the conversation with Snape, he must have killed himself. He would have dedicated his death to breaking the Unassailable Curse, and that meant the curse was now broken, and the Horcrux was vulnerable.

But it bubbled and boiled with blackness, and the darkness rising from it, forming into a vision of her master who might be about thirty years old, had his choice of bodies. The rat, Snape, Indigena herself—even one of the plants would do, and her Lord could come and make provisions to keep the new Horcrux safe until the spring equinox, would he would gain the power to draw the magic and the shard of soul back into himself if he desired.

The shade did briefly turn his head to the northern wall of the garden, but then sniffed and focused on Snape. Indigena was glad. Snape was still kneeling in shock, staring at Regulus Black's body, as if he had not known his companion could do that. He was going to be easy prey.

And then a white shape formed in front of her, and danced around the shade of her master, blocking its path.

Indigena hissed. *Aurora!*

Her Lord had told her how the shades of the school's Founders had kept the shard from the Sword of Gryffindor from reaching and taking a body for a critical amount of time in the Headmistress's office at Hogwarts. Being shades themselves, they could contend with the younger part of her master in his own world, but he could not possess them. And, from the looks of it, this shade, though spitting and hissing and making continual dives, could not get around the determined vengeance-ghost of Aurora Whitestag. She began to drive him towards the northern wall of the garden.

Indigena, finally recovering from a bit of her fear as the black bitch stood where she was and the rat scampered over to the broken corpse of Black, began feeling for her wand. Perhaps she could fire off a spell that would distract Aurora. The ghost had come to exist because of her, after all. There was at least a chance that Aurora would welcome the opportunity to take vengeance on her more than she would want to stop Tom Riddle.

But Indigena remembered the words that Aurora had spoken to her about stopping instead of killing, and felt a moment's spark of uneasy wonder.

And then a bellowing roar, a cry of anguish and pain, stirred the garden as the dog's bay had.

Indigena whirled around, picking up her wand at the same moment. Severus Snape had snapped back to reality, and he was looking at her with eyes full of dark fire.

And Indigena knew why the dog had remained.

And she was reminded that just because traitors had no honor did not mean that they had no magical strength.

Snape was near her equal in magical power, and just now, his rage had carried him beyond that. He raised his wand and spoke a curse before Indigena could steady her own grip, much less fire off a defensive spell, and the world became dark. He had blinded her, not with the simple, reversible *Caeco*, but with a spell that destroyed her eyes. The boiling, acidic pain struck a moment after the realization, and Indigena could hear herself screaming in a high, thin voice that didn't sound like a member of the House of Yaxley.

Even as she stumbled backward, a cold, dark part of her brain, always rational, whispered that this was no more than she deserved for standing by when her Lord tortured Snape in the Chamber of Secrets.

Another curse, and Indigena's feet were gone, sliced off from her by the bony jaws of what felt like machines, or perhaps conjured scorpions; she had known a spell that did that, once, before she became so involved in the study of plants as not to care for animal magic. It hurt, it hurt, it *hurt*, and she opened her mouth and let loose another wail of pain.

And then Snape spoke, and something small and spiky crawled into her mouth and snipped off her tongue. Indigena choked on her own blood, spitting a large gob of it to the ground before she could continue.

Her wand was useless to her now, and she let it drop, but there were still her darlings, and she was hard to kill, given all the plants curling beneath her skin. She told her thorns to lash straight ahead. They oriented on Snape and traveled in that direction; they could still sense him even if she no longer could.

Snap, and *snap*; he had cut them off in mid-flight, and only empty, soft tendrils fell to rest on her shoulders. Indigena mourned more because of that than all the rest.

And then he cast a cold spell at her.

Indigena's mind clouded. She fell on her back, and the leaves under her skin withered close to her muscles. She was so *tired*. She wanted to curl up and go to sleep under the warm earth. She could do that, and still rise. After all, she'd managed to do it in the wake of Hawthorn's linked blood curses, which should have killed her.

The air around her smelled sweet, and she heard thunder curling in her ears. Then she heard something else: the sound of boots walking.

Step, and step, and they were beside her. Indigena rolled so that her face pointed in that direction, though with destroyed eyes and tongue, she could not face her executioner and could not offer up a final moment of scorn for the way that he had betrayed his true allegiance.

The curse that killed her began deep in her internal organs, rupturing them one by one and then driving them out through her skin in a messy spray of blood and flesh and slick things. Indigena had seen it used, and so she knew what was happening as she fell away from honor and pain into the endless bay of a hound.

Strangely, though, the final sensation she knew was not pain, but relief, and the vision that accompanied her was one of Minister Scrimgeour.

Harry would have fallen if not for Draco. Merlin, why wasn't the shade coming to him? Harry had both a solid body and magical power that resembled his own to offer him. He called, and called again, and only felt the dark presence of the shade buffeted towards him after long moments in which he could feel nothing but his palm and Draco.

Not that it was a bad thing, to feel that much Draco.

And then a pair of shapes came over the garden wall, one dark and one white, and Harry didn't pause to see who had helped him snare the shade of Tom Riddle. He simply lashed, drinking, the jaws of his *absorbere* gift rising and falling with a regular crunching motion. He needed to chew, he needed to masticate, and he needed to swallow. His belly ached with a savage pain, but he would get used to that later. He could even throw up, once this moment was past.

Tom Riddle fought him, of course. From what little he could see, Harry thought this was an older Tom Riddle, which might explain why he hadn't come directly for Harry as the younger specimen from the ring had; he was more experienced, and too sensible just to dash straight for the nearest source of power. But he was still restricted by his need for a body, and by the fact that he couldn't drain Harry's magic the way Harry could drain him, and by the experience Harry had of swallowing bits of soul like this before.

Harry leaned forward, trembling, all his magic working at the feast. Shards of dark power dropped directly into his stomach, and he broke out into cold sweat and then began to physically retch, though he only brought up bile since he'd had the sense not to eat anything before they left for the garden. But all the time, Draco maintained hold of him, and Harry drew, and the piece of Tom Riddle floated towards him, screaming.

And then Harry bit off his head.

The rest of the magic folded up and fell into its proper place, tucking itself into him like a parasite. Harry shuddered. It was like swallowing a tapeworm. But he had managed worse, and he would manage worse in a few days, when he fell off the mountain, and so he finished it.

When he stood, he nodded to Draco. "Thank you," he said, and then looked up at the white shadow that hovered above the garden wall, wondering if that was a piece of the shade he would have to eat, too.

To his shock, Aurora Whitestag's face smiled back at him. Then she bowed her head, extended her hands in front of her, and dimmed like morning fog before the sun, thinning and vanishing. Somehow, Harry doubted that she would ever return.

And then the cold in the center of his hand struck again, and he said as softly as he could, "Regulus is dead."

Draco stared at him. Then he said, "Are you certain?"

"I think so." Harry began to pick his way around the garden wall. "Come on. We should find them."

Peter met them at the entrance of the garden, practically pulling Snape behind him. Harry saw why he had so much trouble as soon as Snape faced them fully. He had Regulus's body in his arms, and he wouldn't loosen his grip on it by one iota, even when Peter kicked him.

"Indigena Yaxley is dead," Peter said, in a horrible flat voice. "Severus killed her. And the Horcrux is gone. And I don't know what to do with the rest of my life."

He looked so lost that Harry gave him one hard hug, then stepped away from him and approached Snape.

His father didn't look up from Regulus. Only when Harry softly spoke his name did he glance away from the dead face. Harry caught a glimpse of the way Regulus's spine was twisted then, and winced.

Snape's face was full of the self-recrimination of one who had realized a beautiful truth too late.

Harry leaned forward, and put his arms around him, and said nothing. There was nothing to be said, except for something far away in the garden, where a black hound called a fourth time, and then was silent.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Five: In a Sea of Mourning

Snape could not see, nor hear.

Well. He could see one thing, hear one thing. He could see Regulus's gray eyes, wide and glazed in death. The idea that peace came to the dead was a laughable thing. He could feel the broken shards of Regulus's spine jabbing into his arms. He had not died *peacefully*, but given up his life in an incredibly horrendous and painful way. It was beyond Snape's understanding why someone would speak of this as an ending of pain.

He could hear the voices chattering and washing around him, sometimes speaking his name, sometimes speaking Regulus's, trying to give comfort the best they could. But none of them had been in his position, knowing love given too late, and so he ignored them. Most of his life, other people had assumed they could understand something about him, that they had something in common with him, and that was the reason behind all the sympathetically outstretched hands. But they had nothing in common with him, and so Snape refused to admit them and their words. He sat where he was, and stared into Regulus's face, and waded into a sea of self-recrimination.

It was familiar. It felt like home. After all, he had stayed there for a good long time after Voldemort had first fallen. And who was there now to rescue him? Anyone who reached out of sympathy wouldn't understand. Anyone who presumed they understood what it was like to lose love so early would not be right.

Snape sat, and did not care what went on around him, or even the way that Regulus's body stiffened in his arms. No, this was not Regulus, who had gone on, but it was all that remained. And this lonely shell was all that Snape deserved, a fitting and bitter symbol of his failures.

Connor watched the door of the bedroom, gnawing his lip. He didn't think that he *could* intrude. He had nothing to say to Snape's grief. He hadn't known Regulus well, though he'd liked him. And Snape hated Gryffindors, and hated him. He would not welcome Connor Potter's comments on the way that he moped.

On the other hand, this was worrying Harry, who had gone in and talked to Snape for a few hours, and then come out shaking his head and saying nothing had changed. Connor didn't want his brother worried.

No one else was in there.

Finally, Connor opened the door of the room. Unsurprisingly, he thought, potions vials covered every available flat surface. They sometimes bubbled and sometimes glittered, but didn't move when Connor edged into the room. He supposed they were all balanced enough so they wouldn't fall over.

Snape sat on his bed with Regulus's body draped across his lap. Connor wrinkled his nose a bit. Was it starting to smell already? He didn't know if dead bodies decayed that fast, but he wouldn't be surprised. Maybe it was potions ingredients he was smelling.

"Sir?" he tried.

Well, he got more of a reaction than Harry had reported. Snape's head snapped up like a snake striking, and he *glared*. Connor kept himself from reeling at the glare. He had done nothing wrong. At least, if Snape yelled at him to get out, then that would be forcing him to do something other than stare at Regulus's body.

"Get *out*," Snape snarled, right on cue.

"Are you going to stop staring at Regulus and let them prepare him properly for burial?" Connor demanded, because he might as well. "Or burning," he added, remembering Harry's account of Sirius's funeral. "I know that they burn the Black bodies, to return them to the stars."

If anything, Snape's glare became more poisonous still. "Get *out*," he said, the way he might have said it to a student who insisted on lingering in the dungeons classroom when a potion full of poisonous fumes had just spilt. Of course, there was no more dungeons classroom because there was no more Hogwarts. Connor wondered for a moment if he would live to see it rebuilt.

Then he shrugged and told himself that of course he would, and to stop being stupid, and looked directly into Snape's eyes. "You do know that they'll have to burn the body eventually? Harry has the right, as the Black heir, and so does Draco, since his mother was Regulus's cousin—"

And then he was facing the end of Snape's wand. Connor had the sense to stop talking, but not the sense to run. Why would he? He could take anything Snape could throw at him. He glared back at Snape, thought of transforming into a boar so he would at

least have a tail to switch, and thought better of it.

“Get *out*, now,” Snape whispered.

It was the undertone to his voice, like dark water running beneath stone, that convinced Connor, more than any threat could have done. He nodded, and stepped out, and closed the door behind him. *Then* he allowed himself to shake a bit.

“You didn’t, Potter.”

Connor rolled his eyes. Draco was leaning against the side of the corridor, and looked torn between scornful and incredulous.

“There was at least the chance he would respond to me,” Connor said. “And he did. He didn’t seem overjoyed with the suggestion that you and Harry would have to take the body for burning, though.”

Draco’s hands clenched one around the other. “How can you do this?” he demanded sharply. “Do you have any idea what he’s lost?”

“No,” said Connor. “And I don’t think that you have, either. After all, Harry admitted his love to you, and he’s still alive.”

Draco turned away as if the argument weren’t worth bothering with, but said over his shoulder, “Leave him alone, Potter. For *his* sake. I personally wouldn’t care if he flayed all your skin off—it’s what you deserve—but I wouldn’t want him to wake up and find out he’d done that.”

Connor gave the closed door a dubious glance. He still thought someone should go in and talk Snape out of his idiocy, but he supposed it couldn’t be him.

The sight of Regulus’s face, so still, and the knowledge of what his fate had cost Snape, had given him an idea, though. Connor wasn’t sure Parvati would agree to it, but he needed to ask her. So he went to her bedroom, and knocked, and, when she opened the door, stepped inside and shut it behind him.

Draco snorted as he made his way down to the kitchen. *Fucking Potter. Always has to follow his idiotic ideas exactly when he should stay out of things. Well, I’m not going into Professor Snape’s rooms. He’ll need to work this out on his own, and I think we should leave him alone until he does.*

He found Harry sitting at the kitchen table, talking quietly with Peter Pettigrew. The man had his head in his hands, and didn’t look up. Harry leaned forward, eyes on him, and went on talking. After a moment to consider if it was his business or not, Draco decided it was. He was unaware of what sins *Peter* had committed that made him a candidate for sympathy. It sounded, from the story, as though he’d done everything he could in the garden, and it simply hadn’t been enough to prevent Regulus Black’s suicide. Draco didn’t think anyone could have.

“—not meant to be a sacrifice for that Horcrux, then,” Harry was saying. “That doesn’t *matter*, Peter. I appreciate what you decided to do. Deciding to give your life up in advance, and holding that *secret*...” He shook his head and squeezed Peter’s hand. “But that doesn’t mean the rest of your life is valueless.”

Draco blinked. Now that he thought about it, he remembered his idea that Peter’s behavior had been odd lately, and that he might have decided to make himself the sacrifice. He wondered if Peter had told that to Harry, or if Harry had wormed it out of him on his own, and edged a little closer to listen.

“But it’s so hard,” Peter whispered. “To think that my life was ending, to see it as a black cliff beyond which nothing more could lead me on, and then to learn that, actually, there was no chasm at all, because someone else took my place. I feel like I gave all my energy to a blow, and then the spell hit nothing.”

“I know,” said Harry, with so much passion in his voice that Draco felt caught somewhere between wonder and jealousy. “I’ve leaned on a purpose like that, too, Peter, and then had to find something else to do with my life when I found that purpose had faded, or was wrong and not—mine in the same way I thought it was. You were there when one of the key moments in that change happened. Remember?”

Peter’s face changed as he evidently remembered the Shrieking Shack. Draco bit his lip to keep from snarling. That was, perhaps, the part of Harry’s life he resented missing the most, though he’d seen it both while sharing Harry’s mind and in Pensieve

memories. Harry, Connor, and Peter were the only ones who knew what it was *really* like to watch the prophecy turn out not to have marked Harry as guardian at all, to reel in those stunning moments of truth that the rest of the world had only slowly come to know. Draco knew that, short of acquiring a Time-Turner, not even Harry being more open could change that for him, but it didn't stop him from resenting it.

"But—you didn't think you were going to die," Peter whispered then.

"I had to get used to thinking of a life of my own," said Harry, "a life that included Draco, and Snape, and you, and Regulus, and more people than just my brother. No, I didn't believe I would die in a few days at the time. I believed I could die *any* day, that my life might be required of me to defend Connor, and that was all right. In fact, what other purpose had I been born for? But it took a long time to move on from that. So I don't expect you to change your mind overnight, Peter. Merlin knows *I* didn't. I just object to the idea that you'll never adjust, that your life would have to become a sacrifice to be worth anything." His voice altered. "And that you did anything wrong. Regulus killed himself because he *wanted* to. He had a moment to choose, and he did it. I don't think he died unhappily. He had foreknowledge, in a sense, and he was still one of the most joyful people I've ever seen. I wish that for you."

Peter licked his lips for a moment, then said, "There is still one Horcrux left."

"And, currently, I have no idea how to get it away from Evan Rosier," Harry said easily. "So you could be the sacrifice. If you were in a position to choose that, then—yes. I couldn't gainsay you, because you would have chosen it of your own free will." Draco wondered if Peter saw the soft shine of tears on Harry's cheeks, or if he was too caught up in his own emotion. "But I wish you wouldn't think that's the *only* reason you're still alive, Peter. What happened if you aimed for it, and then someone else got there before you again?"

Peter opened his mouth as if he would say something, and ended up closing it. Draco shifted impatiently. He wanted to intrude and say that Peter should mourn more for his friend than his own lost opportunity to lose his life—but, at the same time, he didn't know if he had the right to intrude on a conversation this intimate. He was not Connor.

"I miss him," Harry said. "I'll always miss him. And I wish Snape had been more courageous, or easier to court, but then he wouldn't be my father. Merlin knows that. But, please, Peter, don't feel that your still being alive is a waste." He sat back and surveyed Peter earnestly. "You won't, will you?"

Peter hesitated a long moment more before he shook his head. "How can I?" he whispered. "I don't—I didn't think what my life could mean, to other people besides myself, or that others had had the same experiences." He wrapped his arms around Harry's shoulders and hugged him tight. Harry hugged him back. From his angle, Draco could see his knuckles turning white as they dug into Peter's robes, which made him close his hand in envy. He let out his breath, and tried to remind himself that just because Harry was sharing his grief with Peter didn't mean there would be none left to share with Draco.

"I'm sorry that Regulus is dead," Harry whispered. "But I'm glad you're alive. I hope you can be."

Peter said nothing, just drew back, clenched Harry's shoulder for a moment, and then walked out of the kitchen by the other door, so that Draco didn't have to move. Harry sat where he was, eyes closed and breath heaving in and out of his lungs. Draco watched him, curious and concerned. Would he sit where he was and resume his barriers, the way he had before? Would he go up to Snape and try to comfort him, as he'd spent the morning fruitlessly doing?

No. He stood up and walked towards the door Draco stood next to, an unusually determined expression on his face, but he made no effort to wipe the tears from his cheeks, and this wasn't the way to Snape's rooms. Draco drew back, watching in silence.

Harry halted when he saw him, though, and his face reflected honest surprise. "You're here," he said. "I thought you were in our room."

Draco shrugged, as though his being here were nothing more than a fortunate accident, but his mouth betrayed him. "You were looking for me?"

"Yes," Harry whispered. "I wanted to—Merlin, Draco, he's *gone*." And then he moved forward, leaned his head on Draco's shoulder, and began to cry, in a quiet way more intense than the tears he'd shown so far.

Draco lifted his arms and put them carefully around Harry's shoulders. He did not dare to hope, not yet. He had hoped and been disappointed so often before.

But there was a tiny spark of something down at the bottom of his belly, which could have been hope if he would have admitted

to it. Harry had sought him out, while there was still someone mourning fiercely, uncomforted, and before he was at the absolute end of his tether, for no other reason than sharing his grief.

There *might* be hope, just as there might be an answer to defeating Voldemort somewhere in the Black houses and treasures that Harry had inherited.

Snape did not look up, because the world beyond the end of his hands did not matter. He heard the door open, and footsteps cross the floor, but that was well enough. They were not Potter's footsteps, and so he did not have to lift his wand and fire off a curse. He curled tighter around Regulus's body. The shards of bone jabbed into his arms again. Perhaps they had cut the cloth and made him bleed, and that was why it was harder to hold the corpse than it should have been. He did not care enough to look. He stared into Regulus's face. He had closed the eyes sometime in the last half-hour. The glazed look had begun to get to him, because Regulus had never looked that lazy, that unalert, when he was alive.

Perhaps he would have, if—

But Snape's mind cut away the weave of images and situations that could have led to such an occurrence. He wasn't interested in them. And he wasn't interested in the voice of the person who had settled beside him, either. They could say whatever they liked, and leave again. They would, of course. Snape could not imagine who in the world would care for him now, after he had rejected and lost his chance with Regulus. Surely anyone else would decide that he could not be trusted with the treasure of affection. Why should they? Who wished to love someone who continually learned the truth too late, long after he should have learned it?

"He was like a child when he first appeared in my head."

Harry. Of course. And Snape had his answer for someone who would try to love him even after he had wasted Regulus's time and heart. He simply didn't care. Harry would try to reach for him, and this time Snape would not grasp his hand, but sit in silence until it fell.

He knew it was selfish, self-concerned, horrible. That did not matter. Grief was selfish.

"I had only heard of him not long before. And when I understood what Voldemort had done to him, I was horrified. A curse, months of horrible pain, and then Transfiguration into a wooden dog—though I didn't find that out until later. Not only depriving him of a body, but making him feel pain even then. He never exactly *confirmed* it to me, but I think he could still feel pain when he floated in that connection we had, thanks to my scar. He only didn't feel it when he retreated into the dog, and then there was only stillness, nothingness. He survived boredom, nothing to sense and no one to talk to, for thirteen years. I think I would have gone mad."

Snape had known all that. He wondered why Harry thought that telling him now would make any difference.

"And yet he remained so like a *child*, even when he'd regained his memory, which he didn't have when he appeared in my head." Harry's voice was full of wonder. "That innocence, that amusement with life. I've never known anyone else who had that. It wasn't as if he was *untouched* by darkness. I saw that when he came back from Death's country, how much it had unnerved him to see her. But it wasn't entirely new to him. He lived through it." A hand drifted out and touched Snape's arm. "And he knew you, then."

Snape tried to draw his arm back. The hand followed, as if Harry didn't notice the attempt to pull away, or didn't care. *Probably the latter*, Snape thought, and a small ball of resentment formed in his stomach.

"I can't conceive of the strength it must have taken, to last through such darkness, and then the darkness in between, and then to volunteer to go into the darkness again, in Death's country, not knowing if he would ever come back," Harry whispered. "And his childhood was hardly good, either, given his parents and the conflicts with Sirius. And he knows how Sirius died, he was there when he died, and he had to bear with the knowledge that he suffered and Regulus himself couldn't do anything to prevent it. And he was kept away from me for half a year in my fourth year, from the autumnal equinox to the spring one, and I think Voldemort tortured him, though he never said. And still he *lived*."

"Of course he did," Snape said, compelled to answer by the tone of awe in Harry's voice. "If he had not, he could hardly have done—this." He gestured to the broken corpse in his arms with the hand that Harry held, hoping that would make him release it. No such luck.

"I didn't mean lived as in survived," said Harry. "Anyone could have done that. I mean lived as in he picked himself up, and

forgave the latest tragedy, and went on living with a heart that he didn't allow to scar."

Snape turned his head to stare at him. Harry's eyes stared back at him, earnest and bright green and showing no sign that he understood the ridiculousness of what he had just said.

"He certainly did not *forgive* Voldemort," said Snape, his own voice half-alien to his ears. "He worked against him from the day that he understood how important the locket Horcrux was. And Voldemort was the source of too much suffering and misery in his life."

"I didn't say that he forgave *him*," Harry countered calmly. "He hated the people it was reasonable to hate. I said that he forgave the *tragedy*. There are too many people who start hating life when something bad happens, who assume that the whole world is like that, and harden their hearts against more living. They assume that one burned hand means they'll always get burned, and never extend it again, stupid though it is to think the whole world's fire. Regulus didn't do that."

"And *I* did." Not even Snape could tell if the predominant tone in his voice was anger or self-loathing.

"Yes." Harry's hand tightened on his wrist, so that he really couldn't pull away. "And so did I, and so did Lucius, and so did James, and so did Lily, and so did Peter, for a while, when he did nothing but sit in Azkaban Prison and assume that the whole world hated him and blamed him for something he'd been *ordered* to do. He didn't summon the will to push against the phoenix web, really crack it, and escape until he read that I was suffering from the same kind of thing. He and Regulus and Hawthorn are the only people I've ever known whose lives are wasted and struck down by grief after grief, and yet who go on living like that. And Peter came near to losing the capacity today." Harry's voice hardened a bit. "He'd become too wrapped up in the notion that he had to die in the garden, and that nothing else he did was useful."

Snape stared at him.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You were not supposed to agree with me," Snape whispered, though he was not sure who had written the script he and Harry were straying from. Perhaps he and Harry had written it, during the other times that he had been comforted or watched Harry comfort others in grief and heart-sickness. "You said—you said that I did not have the capacity."

"The fact that you're sitting here, and planning to sit here for the rest of your life if necessary, shows that you don't," Harry answered. "And you've certainly lived enough of your life like that. I don't know what you did during your time as a Death Eater, you realize? I have more idea of what Lucius did, though he took care to cover his tracks, and he's certainly never had a heart-to-heart talk with me about it. I don't know what really made you turn your back on Voldemort and come to Dumbledore. I only know a little about what made you choose to side with me. You have your emotions, but you keep them so tightly closed up I have no notion of what's happening in your head, sometimes."

Outraged, Snape tried to pull free. This time, he tugged hard enough that Harry fell to one knee in front of him, but his hand stayed right where it was. Snape suspected it was magic maintaining the grasp, but he had no way to tell.

"You have no right to speak to me like this," Snape snarled. "Do you understand what I've lost?"

"No." Harry's eyes glittered with intensity, and something like anger, as he leaned forward. "I understand that you didn't say that you loved Regulus in time, and so he never knew if you did. I understand that you're unlikely to confess that love to me at all," he added, when Snape opened his mouth. "And I understand that I've made the same mistakes myself, so the moral high ground from which I can lecture you is very small. But I *also* understand that I'm not going to sit here and watch you waste the rest of your life away."

"I would give up the body for burning eventually," Snape said. He felt this point needed emphasis.

"But part of you will always be sitting in this room, holding onto it." Harry's grip tightened to just this side of painful. "I don't want that, thanks. I want you back without thinking that you carry yet another scar on your heart for which you can find no redemption." His eyes slid to Snape's left forearm and the Dark Mark for a moment, then returned to his face. "And it's not that people aren't willing to forgive you. You feel there can be no redemption, and you carry that around with you and make people feel bad for offering it." He took a deep breath, and his hand tightened still further, pressing tendon to bone in Snape's arm. "I want my father back."

"You have no right to do this when the wound is so deep," Snape hissed. He felt as if someone had found his heart and were sprinkling salt over it, with lemon juice to follow.

Harry looked at him again, and Snape realized one thing that was different about his eyes, beyond the fact that usually Harry would have pulled away by now. Harry had no Occlumency pools in place. So compassion was there, but it was fighting irritation and exasperation and grief of his own.

Snape wanted to ask what had prompted that change, but Harry gave him no chance. “We’ve established that already. *No one* has the right to do this. Regulus, maybe, but he’s *dead*.” Snape flinched. Harry didn’t miss it. He dropped his other hand to push Regulus’s long black hair back from his face, to show the horribly twisted neck, which Snape so far had been successful in not looking at. “He’s *dead*,” Harry repeated. “He won’t come back. And you won’t pull yourself out of this on your own. So there go the two people with *rights* over this situation. It’ll have to be someone who cares about you and can risk your anger but who doesn’t care that much right now about whether he’s morally justified in doing this.” He leaned forward, eyes searching Snape’s. “You *will* become a recluse if someone doesn’t shock you from it.”

“I would give up the body, I said,” Snape snarled.

Harry ground his teeth, and for a moment a pair of spiked, bony wings appeared on his shoulders. Then he said, “And this isn’t about that, or anything else that you’ll readily agree to. This is about emotional isolation, as we both know. Are you going to come out of here and start living again? Or will you lock yourself into place and orbit around Regulus the way you once did around your time as a Death Eater? I know that I was able to make you pay attention to *something* besides that when I came to Hogwarts. But, so sorry, I’m all out of emotionally crippled boys who need mentor figures to rescue them from abusive parents and Headmasters. I *need* your help, Father. I need you here with me. I can’t do this on my own.” He shut his eyes as if to keep the tears from creeping down his face, but his voice was still clear. “Come *back*. I’m sorry that Regulus never had the chance to see your heart unshielded, as he should have, but that’s what makes it necessary to live with the consequences of one’s mistakes, instead of just forgetting them or chewing over them.”

Snape had his wand drawn. He didn’t remember drawing it. He fired a spell at Harry. He didn’t know what it was; the image of pain formed in his head, and it emerged from his wand as a line of poison-green light.

Harry lifted a hand and caught the curse in his palm on the silver dogs-head, which reminded Snape too much of the huge hound standing in the thicket and bellowing for Regulus. He had killed the woman who had killed Regulus, but it was never, never going to be enough. He watched in numb silence as Harry wriggled his fingers and dissipated the curse.

“This is silly,” Harry said. “*Both* of us. You *know* he’s dead. You’re one of the best at accepting the inevitable I’ve ever seen, and finding new, workable solutions to problems—when they don’t concern *you*. So now I’m asking you to become skilled at that, too.” He raised his head and shook his fringe out of his eyes, though it fell back so that only one eye and his lightning bolt scar were really staring at Snape. “This isn’t sixteen years ago. You can’t hide in Hogwarts and pretend that no one remembers you or what you did for the Light. You’ve done too much against Voldemort. You’ve done too much for other people. And I’m going to talk about it, and talk about it, and talk about it, until I drag you out of here. I would prefer your willing cooperation, but I don’t need it.”

“What happened to your being *vates*?” Snape snapped.

The insult once would have made Harry back off. This time, his eyes simply narrowed. “One person’s free will ends where it harms others,” he said. “Thus I didn’t have a problem with defending Hogwarts against vampire queens who would have eaten everything in sight. And your remaining the way you are would harm me. Therefore, you don’t get to remain the way you are.”

Snape felt a great helplessness upwelling in him. Harry was right. Sixteen years ago, no one had cared to remember what he did, except Dumbledore—and that only because the Headmaster had wanted to use him at a later point in time. And Regulus, Snape supposed, but he had thought Regulus was dead then.

This time, he had someone both interested in remembering what he could be and uninterested in his excuses. And Harry, he knew, would keep dragging, keep pulling, keep yanking and tugging until he got him out of his shell.

Snape could not say he was *recovered*, yet. But going along—for now—and healing slowly, at his own pace, would be preferable to trying to stay a hermit crab and having Harry continually pulling at him.

Slowly, he relaxed his arms and released Regulus’s body.

Harry understood what the gesture meant. He knelt where he was for a moment, staring hard into Snape’s eyes. Then he nodded, and lifted Regulus’s body, gently, with *Mobilicorpus*, and made for the door.

“When will you hold the funeral?” Snape asked.

Harry turned around. “Not for a day or so. I’ll have to make the preparations. I’ll inform you, I promise.” He lifted an eyebrow for a moment. “And as for your other question, yes, I do intend to remain like this.”

“Who showed you how to do that?” Snape asked. He was not sure he could live without his own Occlumency pools now. They were as much for the protection of other people from his bitterness as they were for him.

Harry gave him a thin, hard smile. “Draco.”

That didn’t make sense, because Draco was no Occlumens, but Harry had left before Snape could ask him anything further. Snape closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall.

Behind him lay the love he had refused and let go until too late. In front of him lay a life without it, a life of learning to recover from his mistakes.

Snape was not sure, in that moment, which frightened him more.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Six: Mountain Fall

“Accept this one,” Harry said, and heard his voice soar as if someone else had propelled it. *Well, I never thought I would be saying these words.* “Regulus Black, younger child of Canopus Black and Capella Black, younger brother of Sirius Black, proper heir of the Black line.” He paused to take a breath, and the white fire running up and down his arms roared as if in triumph. Remembering the way it had twitched at Sirius’s funeral, Harry could only guess that it was glad to be burning the Black heir so designated by his parents. “Pureblood wizard, member of Slytherin House, former Death Eater, legal father of Harry Black, who died in peace and contentment and for all things larger than himself. *Accept him now.*”

The magic was ringing through his bones; it had turned them to silver in a glass case. Harry began to shiver, and could not stop. But the words still flowed from him; he was not sure that he could have stopped them now, either, even if he wanted to.

“From fire we come, to fire we return.” And how strange was it to say *that*, to accept, by doing so, that he was a Black and not a Potter? Harry pointed his wand at Regulus’s body. “*Regulus abscondit!*”

Down came the lightning, straight from the stars, leaping for Regulus’s body. The body *burst*, and from it flowed the silver light that Harry remembered at Sirius’s funeral, the roar too intense to be called mere fire. This was fire transcendent, fire insistent, fire royal, rearing so high that Harry could feel some of his eyelashes and the minor hairs scattered along his body singe and burn and fall off.

And there, there in the middle of it, was Regulus.

Regulus as he had been, Harry supposed, young, though he had never seen him. The image became a small carved wooden dog, and then Regulus as he had been in the last moments before the garden: proud, unafraid, perhaps suspecting his death but nevertheless going unflinching to meet it. And then the light dripped down into the Black coat of arms, and the words *Toujours pur*.

Harry shivered. He had not felt what he did then during the first funeral—but then, of course, he had not been a Black. He wondered if Narcissa had felt this, too, when she burned Sirius. A whirlwind of cold grew under his heart, answering the heat, reaching for it. For a moment, Harry felt as though he stood in a pyramid of silver light, expanding until it reached the white fire, whereupon it exploded, and flooded the world with light.

And then the white light leaped, and *passed* upward. Harry could feel it flying for a moment, the ripples of radiance traveling through him like the workings of his own muscles, the wings that spread out from the sides woven of his hair.

“Named for fire, born in fire, given to fire,” he whispered. He was sure he whispered, but his voice came out as strong as a shout anyway. “Let the fire end him.”

The lightning was among the stars again; Harry saw it though his eyes were shut. He felt the *crack* as it traveled from star to star, going, of course, to Regulus first, but then moving to Capella, to Canopus, and finally to Sirius.

And he did not tell anyone because he was not sure he heard it, and in any case it would have been cruel to the grieving Snape, but he thought he heard a sound, for just a moment, like two brothers crying out in joy.

And then it was over.

Harry opened his eyes slowly, and, for the first time since Regulus's funeral had begun, noticed the other people. They had done this on the flat ground outside Silver-Mirror, among the snow that still covered it. Draco stood behind him, one hand grasping Harry's shoulder tentatively, as if he wanted to hold him up but doubted he needed the support. Snape stood just beyond that, his face shadowed, and Peter next to him. No one else had as good a claim to be part of the funeral rites—though Narcissa would have had, were she still alive—and so no one had asked, though Harry thought the whole wizarding world would not have been out of place in honoring Regulus. He had died to save them, after all.

He opened his mouth, even though he knew there was no post-funeral oration he needed to give—Narcissa certainly had not—and then went to his knees, a soundless scream rising from his throat.

Draco knelt at once. "Harry?" he said, voice tight. "Is something wrong?"

"The houses," Harry whispered, eyes closed. "The houses are claiming me."

He could feel Draco's frown, but he couldn't explain further, the houses had stolen his voice. What had happened was the dropping-into-place of the houses within his mind. Wayhouse shone in a cascade of mingled wood and amusement. Silver-Mirror was there, of course, closest behind him and most solid. Copley-by-the-Sea sang to the rhythms of the ocean it sat beside, far more strongly than Harry had ever suspected when he visited it. And Number Twelve Grimmauld Place waited for him, beating like the heart of a spider. The treasures in them glowed like embers to his mind's eye. Secrets sleeted through him, including ones that he wouldn't be able to explain except to his own heir. Harry guessed the final confirmation of him as Black heir had had to wait for the fact of Regulus's burning.

Heavy weights settled around his shoulders, but none so heavy as the weight of belonging. Harry felt tears of contentment sting his eyes, and then told himself that was stupid. He shouldn't be crying because he felt as if he *belonged*. Shouldn't belonging be a good thing? Shouldn't he have felt this way from the moment that he decided to take Black as his last name?

But he hadn't. And now, rising to his feet, he truly felt like Harry Black. He shook his head, took a deep breath, and fixed Draco with a stare. "What will happen to your ties to all the Malfoy properties when your father dies?" he murmured.

Draco's face cleared. "Ah." For a moment, he lingered, gazing deep into Harry's eyes. Harry looked back. The Occlumency pools were still gone from his mind, and he knew that Draco could see every one of his emotions.

Draco just didn't trust them to last beyond the moment, thought that Harry would finish with the ceremonial parts of the ritual and the grief and then collapse back into being his closed-off self again.

Draco was in for a surprise.

Harry snatched a moment alone as soon as he could, but he told the truth; it wasn't to brood, it was to settle the Black houses in his mind. He stood on the roof of Silver-Mirror, breathing, watching the stars, and pondering whether he should take a star name as his middle one in place of James. It was pleasant, to watch the constellations and the brightest lights and wonder which one would suit him best, as if he had nothing more pressing in the world to worry about.

And when the moments had passed and the Black houses no longer felt like loose teeth in his head, he could confront the vision that waited in his mind, and had ever since he had the fight with Draco just before they went after Ravenclaw's wand.

In his mind loomed a smooth, black, glassy cliff. At the bottom lay broken rocks, and the scattered bones of those who had taken this journey and then lost control of themselves when they hit the bottom.

It was the fall that Harry had been dreading, the one that would smash his shields completely and leave him living in the world like an ordinary human being.

It was the way forward.

If he loved Draco, this was the way it would have to be. And Harry knew he did, but they could not—they could not share as they

had been. That was the best way Harry could phrase it, though he knew other, more complicated things lay beyond that phrasing. He took a deep breath and then let it out, still staring at the fall, still imagining that obsidian puncturing his bones, his lungs.

He carefully layered Occlumency around the one portion of his mind where he truly could not afford to neglect it, his scar connection with Voldemort. Actually, the defenses always should have been strongest there, he thought clinically. Voldemort would try to break through, perhaps, but he would find himself lost amid endless pools, which reflected themselves like mirrors and turned any seeker hopelessly round and round in a maze of drowning.

That left no Occlumency for the rest of his mind.

And that left him hopelessly at the mercy of his emotions, as he had tried to be when he was talking with Peter and Snape yesterday. But now—but now he didn't have the knowledge of their grief to bolster himself, and he would have to make his way forward leaning on the knowledge of what *he* wanted and the knowledge of what he wanted to give Draco.

It was exciting, and yet Harry could still feel the wind blowing around him, and imagine, all too well, the bones at the bottom of that cliff.

He had to trust that his own practice at life so far would be enough to let him fly. And he had to trust Draco, who had asked for those things he wanted. Surely, if he had not wanted them, he could have changed his mind and told Harry that. Harry had to trust him, rather than worrying about what hidden motives he had.

He had to stop hiding from himself.

Terror shook him, and the dizzy vertigo that was half-exhilaration when one leaned over a high ledge.

Harry leaped down the mountain.

Connor paused when he heard his brother coming down from the roof. Something was—well, different. It might have been as subtle as his sense of Harry's magic in the air, but something was different.

He stepped back around the corner, not sure if he wanted to leap out and surprise Harry, the way he sometimes had when they were children. But Harry had never been easy to startle once they passed the age of four or so. He would smile at Connor as if he were the most adorable child in the world, and then pass on.

Well, if things had changed, Connor might get a different reaction.

He waited until Harry reached the bottom of the stairs and started to turn the corner into the hall, and then leaped out with a blood-curdling yell, waving his arms around his head as if he were some sort of yeti.

In moments, he found himself slammed backward, held pinned against the far wall by enormously powerful magic. He tried to breathe, but it was hard with a solid block of air in his mouth, preventing his windpipe from flexing. He heaved at the air, but, Merlin, he couldn't swallow it. He could feel his heart fluttering like the heart of a netted bird.

And then the grip relaxed, and he slid to the floor, and Harry snapped, "Don't *scare* me like that, damn it!"

Connor snapped his eyes up. That didn't sound like Harry. Harry would normally never get so angry over a simple trick, the way that Draco might have. It wasn't as though he considered it an assault on his dignity, when his dignity was always in his own keeping.

Harry leaned nearer, and nearer, and Connor saw into the heart of his green eyes as if they were open air, like the kind he was currently breathing deeply, with gratitude. He could see Harry's emotions there, rich as mineral deposits, dream-like in the way that the branches of imaginary forests were.

"Harry?" Connor whispered, not sure this was his brother.

Harry rolled his eyes and snorted. "Of course I am." He waved his hand again, and Connor was back on his feet, and the minor bump on his head that he'd sustained when he slammed against the wall was healed. "Just don't do that again, all right? My reflexes are so sharp they might hurt you badly, and you're old enough that—well, it looks really bad, Connor. Like you're still a child."

“I grew up,” Connor pointed out absently, more occupied in studying his brother. “What happened to you?”

He wouldn't say the smile Harry gave him was *happy*, exactly, but it was more self-aware. “I grew up, too,” Harry murmured, and then pressed past him and towards the stairs from the third floor.

Connor stared after him, and decided that he would leave Harry alone for a while so that he could adjust to this new brother.

Besides, he wanted to go and see if Parvati had thought of an answer to his question.

Henrietta paused and leaned out of her room when Harry went by. The rhythm of his footsteps had changed. She knew that, because she had learned the ordinary rhythm, which was what obsessed, completely untamed Slytherins who served Lords who could not be called Lords did.

Harry walked a bit more heavily at this moment, and he was heading down the corridor with a determined look on his face, as if he were off to punish a portrait that had displeased him. Henrietta wondered which portrait would be stupid enough to argue with a face like *that*. Well, perhaps she would feel sorry for the portrait, but she would rather admire the lines in Harry's face, and the way that he sometimes muttered under his breath as if thoughts were running through his head he couldn't share.

He passed out of sight. Henrietta continued watching the way he had gone, thoughtfully, then pulled her head back into her small private study.

Well.

She had always known what she had would have to do, of course. Even before she had come up with the plan, the truth had been written there, in the curl of old hatred, in her bones and blood that descended from Dark wizards and witches who had always followed the same traditions. The fact that she was born human made her have to breathe, and the fact that she was born Dark and Bulstrode meant she had to perform this dance this way.

But she had only hoped, an odd, fragile, slender hope, what Harry might be after it, when she was not there to watch him with the same eyes.

For the first time, she now felt true hope, that even when she was not in the world to serve him in unobtrusive ways, still he might serve himself and not turn into the kind of Lord she would have been ashamed to serve.

Thoughtfully, she dipped her quill back into the inkwell and began her letter to Evan over. Her mood had changed, and that meant she needed to write a different letter.

Harry would not like what she was doing, when he found out about it. That didn't matter. What mattered was that Henrietta did what he needed, gave him the kind of service he *had* to have. Sometimes that would be the same as what he wanted, and sometimes it wasn't.

Snape actually stepped out of the library where he had sat brooding and reading, and caught Harry's chin, tilting his face up.

He had not meant to, but he had caught one glimpse of Harry's expression as his son went by, and that had been enough to concern him, to tug him out of the grief that seemed to have intensified since Regulus's funeral. Anyone who thought holding a ceremony and burning the body was an antidote to grief had never watched a Black heir ascend in white lightning to the stars.

“Harry,” he said quietly, staring into eyes that were entirely, and worrying, devoid of Occlumency. “What have you done to yourself?”

“What I should have done a long time ago,” Harry said, evenly, but as if he were standing on a very fragile bridge, a thread of light above a deep abyss. “My Occlumency is still guarding my mind from Voldemort, Father. That's what it *should* do, what you trained me to do in the first place when he broke into my head in second year. But I've used the rest of it for too long to suppress my emotions.”

Snape's fingers tightened a little; he couldn't help it. It was too close to some of what Harry had said to him yesterday, when they

talked about Regulus and his grief. “And so you believe that using Occlumency to suppress emotions is wrong, now?”

With a wrench, Harry freed his chin from Snape’s fingers and stepped back a safe distance. From the spark in his eyes, though, Snape was not sure which one of them the safety was for.

“I didn’t say that it was wrong *for you*,” Harry snarled. “Just wrong for me, for right now. It would have been all right if I had a different partner, maybe, or someone who was content to wait out the war and then have my full attention when it was done.” For a moment, an annoyed look wrinkled his nose. “He just *couldn’t* wait,” he muttered. Then he focused on Snape again. “My words implied *nothing* about you, just about myself.”

His face turned a bit red the next moment, but he didn’t apologize. He just held Snape’s eyes and added, “Do you understand, sir?”

And Snape understood, then, how Draco could have taught him about Occlumency despite not being an Occlumens himself.

He hesitated. Part of him would have liked to walk Harry into the library, sit him down, and ask him if he really knew what he was doing. Harry had gone so many years with some type of control over his thoughts, whether that be phoenix web, Occlumency, or his own severe self-possession from the training. Did he want to give that up all at once? Could he afford it, when they were in the middle of a war that Snape would not see Harry marked by more than necessary?

But he did not know if it was wrong. The training itself had been wrong, and the phoenix web. The Occlumency had aided Harry much more than either of those, but Snape had to remember, now, those times that Harry had misused it, suppressing his emotions for too long during the Woodhouse rebellion last year, and locking his feelings in ice, and shutting himself off from those who could have helped because, without emotions, he saw only the danger and the damage to them, not himself.

He had not been wrong to teach Occlumency to Harry. But Harry was the one who must make the decision about how to use it.

Slowly, Snape nodded. “I do understand,” he said. “I hope that you make as good use of the lack of pools as you have made with them.”

Harry’s face relaxed, and he reached out and clasped Snape’s wrist in what was not quite a handshake. An oddly formal gesture, but then, Snape thought, Harry still called him sir, too. Formality seemed to be the way he related most comfortably to Snape, and there was no reason to rip that away.

And then Harry changed even that by saying softly, “Thank you, Father,” and walking down the hallway.

Snape stared after him. Absurdly, the first thought that occurred to him was to wonder what Regulus would have said, and the second, riding the knife-pain of the first, was to decide that Regulus would have liked to hear Harry call Snape “Father,” whether Harry had taken the Black last name or not.

Draco started when the door opened. Harry stepped in and shut it quietly behind him, then must have told his magic to cast locking and warding spells according to its will, because Draco didn’t recognize the lines of colored light that crawled over the door from any incantation.

“Harry?” he asked. Other times that Harry had been like this, moving this slowly, this calmly, this deliberately, he had had something upsetting to say, and would sit down and explain it in that rational manner that made Draco want to snarl at him.

Harry turned around.

Draco felt as if he’d been slapped. The amount of openness in Harry’s eyes almost hurt, especially because he could see the shivering terror behind it. Harry stepped forward, and knelt in front of him—Draco was sitting on the bed—and took his hand. The gesture was manifestly not one of submission, though, Draco thought, dazed, or oath-swearing, not when Harry’s magic hovered around him like the trailing edge of the Dark Lord’s cloak.

“I’ve thought about what you said,” said Harry, his fingers gently stroking the back of Draco’s palm. “And I’ve come to the conclusion that there really is one thing you want, more than all the others.”

“Harry—“ Draco tried to warn, though his throat was so thick he wondered if he could get the words out. He wanted this *so much*, but not if Harry was only giving it to him to gratify his desires, or because Harry thought it was something he needed, like

comfort after his mother's death.

"Listen, for once!"

Draco lapsed into silence, blinking. Well, that was certainly different, both the sharp tone and the lightning that cleaved wings into Harry's shoulders. The lightning was gone as quickly as the similar white bolt that had consumed Regulus's body, but Draco could feel the charge lingering in the room with them, and knew Harry had been irritated.

Irritated. When was the last time he felt that, instead of the rage that he felt when Hogwarts fell?

Draco leaned back on the pillow, and gave a slow nod, though he never released Harry's hand. "I'm listening."

"I want to give you all of me." Harry's head cocked, the same gesture he used when he didn't understand something simple Draco tried to explain to him, but his eyes were intent and oh, so frightened. It was the fear that convinced Draco Harry did, in fact, know what he was doing. He would never have been so frightened if he were merely handing over something he thought Draco needed. "All the time. I just—that's what you want, Draco, isn't it?"

And even the plea at the end, the fear that he'd made a mistake, did not deter Draco, because Harry wasn't sounding as though this mistake were the end of the world. He just wanted to know if this was the answer to a question he'd wanted answered for a very long time.

Draco leaned forward and kissed him, hard enough to bruise. And Harry kissed back, pushed back, urged him down and then slid a knee in between Draco's legs. Draco arched and half-shrieked. He'd felt Harry's magic before, of course, but never like this. Even during the Halloween ritual, Harry had used it directly on Draco himself, to make the experience of having his cock sucked more intense. This felt as if the magic were under Harry's own skin, spines and spikes of pleasure that kept rubbing in the most unpredictable places, and might make anything feel good.

Harry pulled back and stared down at him, panting, and his eyes were full of lust.

Draco couldn't remember when he'd seen that outside a ritual.

For a moment, he was so excited that he couldn't even make a decision about what he wanted. Did he want to come quickly and then build up to a more intense orgasm later? Or did he want to draw this out, to see if he could tease what remained of Harry's self-control into shivering broken pieces? Or did he want to take Harry and see him give himself fully and freely over, as he hadn't done since the first time they made love, during Draco's Declaration to the Dark?

No, he decided at last, staring into Harry's eyes. None of those. None of them are tests enough for what I want.

"Fuck me," he said.

Harry nodded. There was no pause to ask if Draco was sure, because if he wasn't sure, why would he have said it? There was no helpless response, the way that there had been during their Halloween ritual. Harry trusted him enough to think that Draco was telling the truth.

Draco couldn't remember when Harry had trusted him that much.

Harry snapped one hand in a casual, dismissive motion, and both their clothes were gone. He *could* use his magic that way, of course, but Draco had never seen him use so much power for so trivial a purpose. He could feel the blast of concentrated air along his skin as the cloth vanished, and already, his erection was hard enough that pain as well as pleasure coursed along his groin.

"Please," he whispered. "Merlin, Harry, *fuck* me."

And Harry heard the undertones in that word, too. *Don't hold back, don't do things that can only be attributed to a ritual forcing you through the steps, don't make slow and tender and patient and gentle love just because it's the kind of thing that you're more comfortable with.*

Harry nodded, and leaned forward to kiss him one more time, and then whirled his magic around both of them like a cocoon. Draco's sight of the room vanished behind heavy blue-gray curtains, leaving him only Harry to look at.

Harry, with his shining green eyes with terror at the back of them, and black hair that looked wind-ruffled, and skin glistening with sweat already, and cock glittering with pre-come and a lubrication that the magic had put there, apparently by forcing it

through his skin.

Draco keened a little. He didn't think he could help it, and he didn't think anyone with an ounce of human feeling would have blamed him. He spread his legs, but that was the most help he was going to give Harry.

He waited.

Harry knew he could do this. It was like flying against dragons. He was afraid, but it was the right thing to do, and, in the end, it would make *him* as well as Draco feel good. The last time, it had been to stop the clamor and pressing of the dragons' wild thoughts on his mind. This time, it was to begin healing the breach that he had caused.

He did not delude himself into thinking the wound would be that easy to heal, or, for that matter, that he would get everything right. The wish to get everything right the first time had been what held him back for so long. He knew better now.

He leaned over Draco and kissed him, fiercely enough that his lips ached, and he felt Draco's lip bend backwards over his teeth. A few small drops of blood resulted. Harry gnawed at the split in Draco's lip, and then pulled back long enough to hold his eyes. Draco looked astonished, but delight was struggling to surface somewhere under the shock.

He moved his magic in precise, controlled sweeps, nothing comforting about them, nothing safe or sure. One spell coated his cock, one filled Draco with lubrication, and one did the work of fingers in widening the entrance to Draco's body. Draco blinked again, and the astonishment shone alone in his eyes for a moment. Harry didn't let it stop him. The roar of blood was loud in his ears, but he was sure—he had to be sure, so he was sure—that he would be able to hear Draco telling him to stop if it hurt, if he was too forceful, and that Draco *would* tell him to stop.

If it hurt.

Harry pressed inward. This time, he rejoiced in the shove of his hips, the force of his longing to push, to dominate—something he'd never been allowed to do before, certainly not the first time he had sex with Draco or in the Halloween ritual or in any time since. The darkness in the pool at the back of his mind roared, and Harry felt it pour through him. Like his magic, he was coming to realize, it didn't require blood and killing to be happy. It just required that the work be—intense.

Draco made sharp squeaking noises at times, but Harry hesitated only once, when he was fully inside and Draco still heaved and huffed and sounded upset. It was trouble to wait, when his blood pulsed through him and told him to *move*, but he sat still nevertheless, eyes on Draco's, until he received a nod.

And then he let himself *move*.

He'd never done this before, and his mind was a firestorm of conflicting impressions: the warmth surrounding him, the whirl of his magic and his blood through his veins, Draco's eyes wide open and staring into his face, the blond hair plastered flat to the pillow with sweat, the endless motion of his body. He couldn't hold himself back, and he didn't want to. There was nothing to fear here. There was a great deal to trust. He only had to give himself to that, and he would.

Thrust and shove and push. This was not so hard, after all. He instinctively knew how to do it. And it instinctively felt so good that he wondered absently how he *had* held himself back for so long.

Perhaps that's one of the true evils of my mother's training.

Draco didn't think he'd ever felt so smug or so satisfied, and Harry had done nothing more than move inside him for two minutes.

He did it. He wants me. I'm the only one he wants in his bed.

That fulfilled an old, old want, and laid an even older fear to rest. Was Harry only doing this because he had to? Would he have done the same thing if anyone was in love with him and requesting it?

But, no. His eyes saw *Draco*, and it was *Draco* he wanted. His eyes never wavered from their steady gaze. His body never faltered in its task, even when Draco skidded up the blankets a bit, or when Harry pressed deep and hit his prostate, making him give a wince that would have panicked the old Harry.

How did he do this?

Then Draco forgot about that, because, Merlin, Harry's hand had come to rest right where he wanted it, on his cock.

He saw Harry's lips move, though the pleasure was exploding through his head so hard that he couldn't hear the words. A moment later, the surface of his eyes seemed to split, and Draco passed easily into his mind. Harry had forged a bond between them, of sorts, enough to allow Draco to feel his emotions and see his surface thoughts. Draco didn't know if Harry was feeling the same from him.

Harry's pleasure was *heavy*, admitting the pleasure of his partner as an equal but not overwhelming component. Draco found himself thinking of bears, of intense, dark couplings in secret caves without light. Harry's magic was everywhere, stinging, singing, springing, coiling inward and coming down with a howl that Draco echoed a moment later when, entirely by surprise, his orgasm came on him.

He thought, as he thrashed and spent himself and Harry's fist grew slick enough to nearly slide off him, that that was the shortest time he'd ever lasted.

It was also the best he'd ever felt.

Harry pushed him flat, and then began the kind of hard fucking that Draco had thought they'd have from the beginning, though he certainly wasn't complaining about what had happened so far. In favor of brutality, Harry had adopted intensity, and it had worked. Draco grinned a bit. Trust Harry to give him what he wanted, but not exactly in the way Draco had thought he would.

He lifted his legs and wrapped them around Harry's waist, while Harry thrust into him, gasping and mumbling little curse words that Draco wished he wouldn't bite off. He'd thought for a while that Harry had a naturally dirty mouth during sex. The glimpse he'd just had into his partner's thoughts confirmed it.

Partner.

Yes, they really were now.

Draco stretched up and kissed Harry, and that was when Harry came. He stiffened for a moment, then pushed forward earnestly again, and again, and again, gasping and moaning into Draco's mouth, his head rolling slack on his neck, and after a moment his mouth was too busy gasping in air for him to say anything at all. The singing of his magic in Draco's ears had soared to a pitch like crickets, the last night before summer ended.

Then Harry fell full-length across him, and Draco lost his own breath in the resulting press on his lungs.

He didn't mind. He didn't mind at all.

He held still and stroked Harry's spine again and again. Harry was breathing softly, not completely asleep, but somewhere near it. Draco curled his fingers in his hair—the grip had to be deep, or otherwise his hand would have slipped free at once, given all the wetness there—and tugged a bit. It was a gesture he'd used before, to convey how possessive he felt about Harry, but he'd never used it with the viciousness he used now. Harry moaned, but didn't protest beyond that.

He's mine. No one else ever got to see this side of him, and no one else will.

Harry lifted himself up and looked down at him with unshielded eyes. The bond between them had ended, since it seemed Harry's magic didn't like to hold that unless he commanded it to do so, but he still didn't have any Occlumency there, and Draco could make out languid satisfaction and easy contentment.

Harry bent down and kissed him again.

"I don't think I can be ready again so soon," Draco whispered, though he felt his cock shift a bit in interest.

"Then I'll play with you until you are," Harry replied, and blew on Draco's ears, watching with almost academic interest as he jumped. "And this time, I want you to fuck me. I'm not missing out on all the fun."

Draco let out a breath, and, just like that, the fears he had still nourished burned. Now they were the emotions that seemed faint and fragile, and the hope that which had conquered.

He's mine.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Whirling Round and Round

Harry leaned briefly back against Draco, then turned, a fire in his eyes. "You're ready."

"Yes," Draco said. *Never readier*, he thought. Merlin, he wanted this so much, at least if it would work the way they thought it would. He and Harry had planned this for hours, but, as Harry was fond of saying, the battle splintered the plans for the battle. The gathering beyond the doors, the official opening ceremony for the new Ministry, could interrupt their delicately laid political configurations.

Harry grinned at him. "Yes, you would be."

Draco wished Harry wouldn't *look* like that sometimes. It made it difficult to refrain from kissing him, and they were supposed to be thinking about other things right now. Draco restrained himself to one kiss on Harry's nose. No one would see, he told himself. They were standing in an anteroom with the doors shut in front of them, only a slender line of light leaking out to fall on Harry's face and hair. No one could have been in here without Harry's patrolling magic sensing them, in any case. So he and Harry were safe to indulge themselves in affection that might make some of their opponents think of them as weak.

Besides, making people think of them as weak could be an advantage, Draco thought. Curious to see what would happen, he kept his arm in place around Harry's waist as the doors swung open, exposing them to an assemblage of devouring stares. Harry wrinkled his nose, but stepped forward, walking within the circle of Draco's grip.

"You can do this?" Draco breathed into his ear.

"I'll have to, won't I?" Harry replied. Since his Occlumency hadn't come back, he showed his resentment of the whole procedure, but he didn't back down. Draco felt as though his heart had lit on fire with pride.

"Of course you will," he said. "Meanwhile, I have to go associate with Elizabeth Nonpareil. Pity me."

Harry laughed at him, and then turned towards the cluster of Ministry officials in the middle of the room, including Cupressus Apollonis. Draco stayed with him long enough for a few photos to be taken, and for anyone who might care to see that he was firmly planted at Harry's side, and Harry was most definitely *taken*.

Then he headed for the cluster of Dark families who were being stupid about having nonhumans in the Ministry, the plan ticking over and over in his mind like clockwork. He and Harry had spent hours on this, talking and mingling their thoughts and pooling political knowledge gained from Lucius, Snape, Harry's training in the history of Dark families, and what Cupressus and Miriam had reported of the Light families they were slowly guiding into the Ministry. It should work.

And if it doesn't, I can ride the chaos.

Elizabeth Nonpareil approached him in a rustle of black skirts bright with artificial stars. Draco reached out and bowed over her hand, sliding into the first words of the ritual greeting he needed to impress her. "Dark water singing over its stones is not more welcome than the sight of your face, madam."

He could not but pluck and tug and weave now, and spin the fabric of dreams, and hope it would be enough.

He was alone. He lay in the dirt under the darkness of where it had all begun, and where it would all end, and pulled through dreams. Slowly, now, he must travel slowly. He had moved too far, too fast, the first time, and that had left visible signs, the dark circles on the skin of his victims. Someone would notice if those circles appeared now.

His heir would notice.

He was not dead, was old Lord Voldemort. He was alive, and only shedding his skin now, like a great snake lying far underground, like the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, like the Midgard Serpent curled around the oceans and which would rise someday to devour the world—a teaching that had heard from an old dying wizard, the last of his breed, in Norway, a wrong story

both by the teachings of other kinds of magic and by the Norse myths themselves, but there nevertheless. And true, he thought, did dark Lord Voldemort, in the darkness. Serpents always survived everything, always ate everything in the end. If the Midgard Serpent did not strangle the necks of everyone who thought of themselves as human, dragon fire would burn them to ashes.

He would shed the skin, and he would *rise*. The vernal equinox was not far away. The world tilted relentlessly back towards the balance between Dark and Light, from the darkest night to the day when the darkness and light were of equal lengths. And from there the sun would return and swell until Midsummer.

Before Midsummer, his heir would be his.

He had been wrong, had old Lord Voldemort, in what he had sought to do with the attacks on the Ministry and Hogwarts—wrong in action, but not wrong in intent. He had wanted to make Harry despair, and then kill him. The second part was unnecessary; he could see that now. The first part still must be.

And there was the third, lying in darkness couched like a serpent himself, though none of them had recognized the signs that marked him as serpentine. And there was the other, the dreamer, the snake in the breast.

Come the first day of spring, and that snake would *bite*. And Harry would never survive what was coming.

He missed his Indigena, did old Lord Voldemort, almost like a snake in the drape of her vines, but the third was a trap set and baited long before. Even Indigena had danced to its movements, her feet echoing the coils of the snake that lay far underground.

Snakes made mountains. The hills of the world were the ridges of their spines. Their tails curled into peninsulas. Inside their jaws were sacred caves where the oldest wizards had held the oldest rites.

He was not afraid. He moved relentlessly out of the darkness, towards the day of his light and his biting, like an old serpent, and in the meantime he wove and spun the fabric of dreams.

Connor held Parvati's eyes. After a moment, she flushed and looked away, shaking her head.

"I don't know," she said, as if the words were being hooked out of her, dragged out of her.

"That's fine," Connor hastened to reassure her. He *had* reassured her, several times already, but he would say it as many times as he needed to. At least she hadn't given him an outright refusal. "Just think about it, all right? I wouldn't want to do it tomorrow night, anyway. That's when Harry's big official Ministry gathering is, and I have to go and deploy some of those Light rituals I'm studying."

He said that hoping to get a smile out of her, but what he got was Parvati exhaling a frustrated breath. "I don't understand you sometimes, Connor," she said.

Connor cocked his head, and waited.

"You—well, you don't have any *reason* to conduct—this—this way." Parvati waved a hand vaguely. Connor knew what she meant, the question he'd asked her and the context that surrounded it, but he wouldn't ask her to say the word if she was that uncomfortable with it. "Your heritage doesn't require you to. And you know that my parents will be angry if they find out."

"Do you want to tell them?" Connor asked. That wasn't something he'd thought of before. Parvati had been beyond angry when her parents appealed to the Ministry to force her to come home. She still wasn't speaking with them, and had had a fight with Padma before she went back, too.

"No!" Parvati said, almost shouted. She clapped a hand over her mouth, swallowed, turned red in the face, and then lowered her hand. "No, not yet," she said, showing Connor a faint smile. Connor nodded, reassured that she wouldn't ask him to keep it secret forever. "It's more that I don't know what to make of you, Connor. Why would you start trying to learn Light pureblood rituals now, when you've never been interested in them before?" Her face flushed even more deeply, but she kept going. "Why would you want to make adult decisions when you seem to enjoy acting like a child so much? Why would you want to have a life like this, when the war could surge back up and swallow it at any moment?"

Oh, *that*. She should have asked him before.

Connor reached out and took her hand, running his fingers lightly over the knuckles. Parvati looked him in the face and didn't ask him to stop. Connor wondered idly if she could feel him reaching after the words. He did know the answer, but he wanted to make sure he phrased it as perfectly as possible. He had noted with Harry that people often paid as much attention to the *how* of his words as the *what*.

"Because I don't think like other people," he said at last. "They see themselves as living in the future. They want to be adults now. They progress along a path. They're children, then teenagers, then adults. And they know that happiness waits for them in the future. They might not have it right now, but they'll have it some time. They know it."

"I think that's *stupid*." He chose that word because some of the other ones he wanted to say would make Parvati slap him. "I think you should have happiness where you find it, and not ignore it because you think you're not ready for it or because some greater happiness is somewhere down the path." He looked up at Parvati. "What would have happened if Harry and Draco had waited? Nothing good, I don't think. One of them might have been killed before now. And what would happen if I insisted that I was still just a teenager because I've seventeen? Stupid things. I wouldn't have been able to accept Sirius's death, or that I wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived, and I wouldn't have been able to tell anyone about Harry's true role in the prophecy. I had to be adult to do that. And I don't want to be adult all the time now, or teenager all the time now. I want to act the way I need to act. So sometimes that's like a child, and sometimes that's like a teenager." He took a deep breath and locked his eyes on her. "And sometimes that's like an adult. I'm not—I don't stop being one just because people think I should. I don't *do* things just because people think I should, so why should I grow like they say I should? I learned that from Harry, you know, or maybe we learned it together. We take a long time to make up our minds about something, but when we want it, we go after it with our whole hearts."

And now he felt shy, which was stupid, but he also hadn't said all that with the most eloquent words in the world, so he kissed Parvati on the cheek and left her there. At least she looked as if she were thinking about what he'd said.

Harry could feel Draco, he thought, as he spoke with Cupressus Apollonis, polite nothings about the way the Ministry had opened and the reaction it had received so far. It was nothing so simple as a magical bond. Rather, he knew where Draco was in the room, knew exactly how many paces he'd have to walk to get to him, and could guess what he was talking about right now.

Well, why not? I wanted this. I want this. And I feel more about him than anyone else.

"And this is Belinda Morningmaid."

Harry eyed the woman in front of him coolly, making sure to keep his bow polite. It would hide the pulse fluttering wildly in his throat, as well as answer for manners. This was the first time he was going to have a political conversation since he'd fallen off the mountain.

He'd heard of the Morningmaid family before this, nothing objectionable—but then Cupressus had owled him with a long list of demands that Belinda had made of the Ministry. She wanted laws to prevent *any* nonhumans from working there, even the close association that the old Ministry had had with Gringotts. She called them halfbreeds, and said that too many of them were Dark creatures. It was Cupressus's opinion that many of the people backing her didn't believe the same things. They were using her as a test case, a fall witch. If she crumpled, it would not hurt them, but if she got away with it, they could successfully assert themselves against nonhumans.

Harry was resigned to such power games always existing. And in the old days, he would have talked to Belinda with patience and calmness and gentleness, trying to make sure he never crushed her will, and she probably would have taken that as permission to keep pressing forward, just the way Aurora Whitestag had.

But now his mind had changed. He was certain that her mind could be changed, as well.

He shifted to the left, and knew that Draco was to his right. "If you wish, Mrs. Morningmaid, we can talk over here without fear of interruption," he murmured. It was one of the many alcoves in the Ministry's Grand Hall that the architects had designed, and Harry sculpted, for private conversation.

"Call me Belinda, please." She arranged herself in front of him, a pretty woman with the usual yellow eyes of the Light purebloods and bright golden curls, touched with red, that made her resemble one of the Gloryflower family. "I'm glad that you decided to talk with me, Mr. Black. I know the Ministry is just finding its feet, but I think this is the time to make it for humans only."

"That's impossible," Harry said.

Belinda froze, and stared at him carefully. Harry wondered if she was more startled by his cold tone or his bluntness. She recovered quickly, of course, and said, “It’s not, Mr. Black. It’s truly not. I understand that, as *vates*, you’re committed to the causes of magical creatures, but they don’t need to participate in human law. We need an area of life where we’re separated from them, don’t you agree?”

“No,” Harry pointed out, and watched her face flush red.

“Mr. Black, if they *won’t* obey our laws, then they can’t have a part in the Ministry,” she said, and then seemed to calm and retreat a little behind the political mask. “Besides, they wouldn’t want us claiming jurisdiction over them.”

“We always have,” said Harry. “We act as though we had the right to tell them where to live, how to live. How, then, can we leave them out of the Ministry? There’s so much that we don’t know, Belinda. We have to have advice on what customs of theirs might require compromise, and when we’re doing something right.”

“We *can’t* have different magical rules for everyone,” Belinda snapped, flexing her fingers as if they stung.

“We can have an adaptive set of rules.” Harry was trying to be polite, he really was, but his temper was boiling behind his eyes. He was beginning to think that Belinda didn’t really believe she would get what she wanted, either. She was just testing him to see what would happen. It was the way that pureblood wizards had reacted to Muggleborn wizards in the old Ministry, after all; they said all the right things in public, but in private they pushed for concessions, for different laws that restricted Muggleborn children while not restricting pureblood, and got them. It might have been different if there had been special laws restricting pureblood magic, too, but that wasn’t the way it worked. “And that’s what we’ll have. As situations arise, we’ll handle them. There might be some centaur behavior we can’t tolerate, for example. The Grand Unified Theory might find out that goblin magic functions in a certain way that means it needs to be kept apart from delicate magical instruments. But we don’t *know* that yet. I refuse to create rules about an unknown situation.” He held Belinda’s eye and dared her to get angry.

She did, but he knew it only from the tightening of her lips. She was a little late in controlling her face, he thought, but better than he would have expected from her initial approach. “We need rules *now*, Mr. Black, not at some undefined point in the future.”

“We’ll have them,” said Harry, with a sweep of one hand. “A base to start from. We’ll adjust them as necessary. I simply refuse to say that, right now, we know everything we must about goblins and centaurs sufficient to create rules for them. We’ll need their input for that.” He turned around as the doors of the hall opened. “And I believe we’re about to get some,” he added.

The *hanarz* came in first, wrapped in chains, surrounded by goblins wearing pendants of silver and bronze and carrying spears. Beside her was Griselda Marchbanks, scowling triumphantly at the shocked witches and wizards. Harry wondered, amused, if she was happier to be seen in the company of goblins or happy that so many people were horrified to see her there.

Following them came three centaurs, one black, one chestnut, one bay. They walked in perfect time, and stood with folded arms in the center of the floor, daring the wizards to come up and speak to them. Harry cleared his throat and stepped forward.

“Please welcome the *hanarz* of the southern goblins,” he said, using *Sonus* to make his voice boom from the walls, “and her human friend Griselda Marchbanks. The centaur emissaries are Lycaon, Wolf, and Hemlock.” The centaurs bowed in turn as he spoke their names. “And we have more guests,” Harry went on serenely, turning towards the doors. He could feel the crowd’s apprehensive gazes following him, and Belinda’s burning eyes on the back of his neck. He didn’t bother hiding his smile.

Draco was on the other side of the doors, just where they’d arranged for him to be. Harry met his gaze and felt a tunnel traveling between them, pulsing with breath and life. His mouth widened into a grin this time, and he barely looked away in time to watch Remus arrive.

He wasn’t alone, of course, being flanked by Peregrine and a few of the other alphas from London, but he was the tallest, and the one that other people here were most likely to know. Harry met his eyes and held them. Into that gaze, he tried to put everything he felt for Remus, the old love and the new confusion, and the near inability to ever trust him again. Remus nodded slightly, saying that he understood.

And Draco moved out to greet and present the werewolves. Harry smiled again. This time, he was sure it looked victorious. There were no words to express how little he cared about that. The interest of the *vates* in some nonhumans was to be expected. The intercession of the Malfoy heir was not.

“Remus Lupin,” Draco announced, to a tide of whispers and a sun-round of more intense stares, “Peregrine, Willow, and Daranda, four alphas of the London werewolf packs.” He bowed, one time for each of them. “Be welcome.”

The whispering grew louder. The other alphas, all women, seemed amused. Remus was still looking at Harry, though, and Harry didn't understand everything that he was trying to say. He was still new to this business of reading people's faces with his own emotions in the way.

"Yes, be welcome here," Harry said, making sure that his gaze took in goblins, centaurs, and werewolves, "as part and parcel of the new Ministry, as subject to its laws, and welcome to its help." He gave a little bow, and then moved forward and took Draco's hand. The bond between them stretched tight, then fell slack as they neared, and Draco nodded to him imperceptibly. Harry relaxed. He had hoped that Draco wouldn't have an objection to dancing with him in public, but he could have changed his mind. He had been hesitant about this part of the plan when Harry suggested it. When Harry asked why, he'd snapped at him not to push.

It had taken a while for the sting of *that* to fade, but, well. Harry had to accept that they lived in a world where they snapped at each other now, and not every mistake was for life. And it was going to be nothing compared to the sting of the Imbolc ritual coming up in a few days.

He held up his hand, and the walls began to sing. More people than just the ones who had come here hoping to wring concessions out of them looked startled at that. Harry caught Cupressus's eyes, and knew the man was wondering if he had built music into the stones. Harry shrugged. He hadn't. He had just wanted the stones to sing, and so they had: the same kind of frenzied music that played on Walpurgis Night, though slow enough that mortal feet could keep up with it.

He and Draco began to dance, a simple whirling pattern that people hastily cleared the floor for. Harry was delighted to see that the first couple to follow them out was Remus and Peregrine, Remus bowing to the other alpha before he extended his hand to her, and the second was Zacharias and Hermione. Hermione's chin was so high that Harry guessed she'd just been talking to some snotty purebloods who still disputed the claims of Muggleborns to any kind of recognition.

"How did it go?" Harry asked, as he and Draco unclasped hands, briefly turned their backs to each other, and then came together again. No one was going to hear them under the music.

"Mrs. Nonpareil is going to be a problem," Draco murmured. "Spoke too well about her connections in France for my liking. I think she still values the International Confederation's ruling too much. She doesn't think of you as a child so much as someone who—well. Who shouldn't be doing what you're doing to expose the magical world to the Muggles."

"How influential is she?" Harry turned around, clapped his hands as the music soared to an intense pitch, turned back.

Draco snorted. "Most of the people around her know she's an idiot. Problem is that she's got money. *Vaults* of it. And she just removed it from Gringotts, so we can't depend on the *hanarz* controlling her."

"Not susceptible to bribery, then," Harry muttered.

"Harry," Draco chided, a purr in his voice. "I didn't say *that*. Everyone is susceptible to bribery. Money just won't work with Elizabeth Nonpareil, after all. But there are other things she wants."

Harry turned his head curiously to him. "You found a solution, didn't you?"

Draco looked smug.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Perhaps I should let you linger in suspense a bit longer," Draco murmured, but his own eagerness to show off his cleverness overcame his desire for mystery, as Harry had known it would. "She admires beauty, Harry. Caged birds that sing sweetly. Old tapestries. Portraits of young wizards and witches."

"And?" Harry prompted.

"I told her you could get her a bird such as she's never seen before," Draco murmured, "silver and white, with a peacock's tail and a cockatoo's crest, which weeps crystal tears when it sings. She believed me. You're the *vates*, and she thinks I'm too young to lie effectively."

Harry frowned. "I don't know any bird—"

“That’s why your magic will make it, idiot,” Draco interrupted.

Harry spent a moment looking at him. Draco looked back, head up as if he were a deer offering his throat to the hunters, his eyes rich.

And it would have been so easy to just laugh and agree, or argue with Draco that a *vates* couldn’t create a magical bird and then leave it in the care of someone who would mistreat it, but neither was what he felt, so Harry used honesty.

“I would have preferred to be asked rather than volunteered into the exotic pet trade,” he said dryly.

“So sorry,” Draco murmured, dropping his head to lip along Harry’s neck. “I could hardly come over and ask you.”

“I know.” Harry sighed and moved Draco’s head away from his neck. He was too distracting. “I’ll make the damn bird for her, because you promised. But it’s going to be able to open its cage and escape if she becomes too much for it, and it will sing and cry most of the time. Such as when she’s trying to sleep, in fact.”

Draco lowered his eyes. “I only told her that I’d heard of the bird,” he said. “I didn’t say I knew *every* detail of its behavior.”

And this, Harry could believe, and did not mind, and knew, and loved.

Connor frowned. “Well, no.”

“Why *not*?” Michael had his arms crossed in front of him again, which was always a bad sign.

Connor rolled his eyes. He didn’t think he needed to be *tender* with the other boy. Michael would never learn if he didn’t receive clear signals. “You can’t demand that other people give you respect.”

“You did.”

Connor shook his head. “No, I just waited in the background until I got pushed into the foreground again.” He grimaced. The memory of his name being pulled out of the Goblet of Fire really wasn’t his fondest one. “And then, when situations came up where respect between me and Harry mattered, I *gave* it. You have to do that, or you can’t expect others to respect and admire you.” He left unsaid that he thought Michael wanted Draco’s admiration, and that was a doomed cause. Draco *loved* a few people, but admired himself, and maybe his own reflection in a mirror, and no one else.

“You still don’t often show decorum around other people,” Michael said, but at least he uncrossed his arms. “I’ve seen the way you act around Professor Snape and Draco and Harry.” He kept his head down and massaged the burn on his face from Voldemort’s magic during the last words, but Connor could hear just fine. Yes, there was still a curl of longing in his voice when he mentioned Draco. Connor wondered why the others couldn’t notice it.

“Harry understands me,” said Connor mildly. “I can act *almost* however I want around him, and get away with it. So I do. And I don’t respect Professor Snape all that much. No matter how many bad things happen to you in your life, you can’t use that as an excuse forever. I’m trying to stay away from him now that Regulus Black’s death just happened, but during our school years? He yelled at people like Neville for *no reason*. He never even hated Neville’s parents. He just decided that the whole world hated him, and so that was another reason to be a sadistic wanker right back. He never asked the world for its opinion.” That was one thing Connor did wonder about. The way Snape acted towards Connor was stupid, but understandable, given James and Sirius. But—Neville? Had Harry never noticed, or did he not care, or had he forgiven Snape for it so long ago that it didn’t matter to him any more? It still mattered to Neville, Connor knew. He still shook a bit when in the same room with Snape, and Snape would snap at him like a rabid dog. He’d done that when they made preparations to go after the Ravenclaw Horcrux and Neville was helping them identify the plants he thought might be in the garden.

“And Draco?”

Not just longing, Connor thought, staring hard into Michael’s eyes. *Admiration, and desire, and resentment of Harry.*

But he didn’t want to get into the argument that would result from that, so he shrugged and said, “Sometimes I respect him. Sometimes I don’t.” He grinned. “He hates that.”

Michael drummed his fingers on the kitchen table. “Why not be consistent?”

“This way is more fun,” said Connor, but relented when Michael glared at him. “All right. The real reason is that *he* varies, too. So when he’s helping Harry, or when he’s acting as if he actually sees the world beyond the end of his nose, or when he does something and it’s—good, like the way he transformed into his Animagus form before I did, I have to respect that. But then he’ll act like a child again, and snap at me when I’m not doing anything, and act as if the whole world should kiss his feet because he was born a Malfoy. So I treat him as if he were a child.”

“He’s not,” Michael whispered.

“We weren’t talking about him,” said Connor. “We were talking about you.”

“I want Dr—people to respect me.”

“So respect them,” Connor repeated.

“It’s hard,” Michael whinged.

Connor patted his hand. “I know.”

So slow, in the darkness. That was the main danger of the weaving, that he would grow impatient and jerk the fabric too quickly, pull against the dreams of yearning and hatred and ambition that were his one chance.

But serpents were patient. And he needed to be patient, this old Lord Voldemort. He needed to lie in the darkness and smell the dirt and contemplate. Then he would rise, when the skin was shed, rubbed off on the rough rocks.

There would be despair.

Harry had found answers. He was good at them. A snake for the diary, a Black for the locket, a Malfoy for the ring, a McGonagall for the Sword, a second Black for the wand. He would, perhaps, find a Rosier for the cup.

But not all questions had answers.

The third waited.

Draco lay in silence on their bed, stroking Harry’s hair. Harry had fallen asleep immediately after they returned, muttering something about living in the midst of his emotions being an exercise in exhaustion.

Draco considered the evening, and whether it had gone well, whether it had been the real Harry in the room with him, and Harry looking at him, and Harry responding to him, or the calm automaton he had seen so often.

He had to smile at his last thought. *Not so calm anymore, not when he shows his irritation in every move.*

But there had been moments when he wanted more attention, when he would have liked some response instead of Harry to simply think about it and then ask questions. On the other hand, Harry had looked at him before they danced, before they entered the room, and many times, expressively, when he went up to Mrs. Nonpareil and promised her the bird she wanted. So he was trying. It wasn’t perfect yet, but there was time to gain more from him, to pull out more of the things he didn’t even *realize* yet that Draco wanted.

And you could try talking to him, too.

Draco paused. Then his hand resumed stroking Harry’s hair, more slowly.

It was a revelation. He thought Harry should know what he wanted, because he’d told him in the past often enough, and one of those things was for Harry to know his moods, instantly, and his needs. But did that have to happen all the time? Why couldn’t he offer help, and demand attention when Harry faltered or looked away? Harry was used to his demanding things.

And...well. Draco would not admit this aloud where anyone could hear, because it sounded so Gryffindor, but he did not entirely

understand Harry, either, and could not predict his every mood and desire. He supposed it might not be entirely *fair* to require absolute understanding from Harry when he couldn't offer it back.

He gave a shiver, to get the Gryffindor squeamishness off him.

He'd ask for more. But first had to come the Imbolc ritual, and that, Draco was not looking forward to. It was not the deepest ritual of the three-year dance, not the most intense, but it was going to be the ugliest.

It would show him what his life would have been like if Harry had never existed, and Harry the reverse.

Draco sighed and closed his eyes. It was the end of January. A few days remained until the second of February.

Harry was warm in his arms, snoring softly, muscles more relaxed than Draco could ever remember feeling them before. Darkness, ugliness, and pain could wait.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Slimy Mud and Rotten Wood

"Why does this one start at dawn?" Harry asked.

"You read the ritual justification," Draco said, and his voice had turned snappish. Harry could hear him fidgeting, though not see him. They had to sit in darkness until the sun rose, when the ritual actually took effect. A day had to pass without their seeing each other. Harry wondered if it counted that he sometimes saw the dim outline of Draco's head when glancing towards the window, or caught a sight of his hair from a stray beam of starlight.

"I did," Harry said, letting his irritation leak out around his teeth. "And I don't understand it. We had to stop seeing each other at midnight, and not see each other until the next midnight. So why doesn't the ritual start at midnight, instead of starting at dawn and ending at sunset the way it does? We spend hours in darkness without being allowed to see each other, but the ritual isn't actually in effect then."

"That's it," said Draco. "That's the point. To see if we can refrain from the sight of each other even when we could have it just by casting a *Lumos*. And then we'll be taken away from each other, and reunited in darkness, and *then* allowed to see each other. It's a ritual to cure the partners of taking each other for granted." His voice dripped with irony that Harry hated.

"I still don't think it makes sense," Harry whinged. He winced a moment later. Sometimes he felt as if he'd taken a Babbling Potion. He was still learning when it was better to keep things to himself. Not even people who had lived while falling from the mountain all their lives, like Draco, said everything that crossed their minds. For the moment, though, Harry was more worried about being accused of dishonesty, so he let everything out.

"It doesn't *have* to make sense," Draco said. "It's a ritual. Now. Did you make all the preparations that we'll need for a day of being out of contact?"

Harry gave a sharp nod, feeling safe to do that, because Draco couldn't see him anyway. "Yes," he said, modulating his own voice to be a little calmer. "I've told the Ministry officials that any questions will have to wait. I've argued most of those who opposed letting nonhumans into the Ministry to a standstill, anyway. There's been no movement on the international front since that letter from Alexandre days ago." It had startled Harry more than a little when he received an owl from the Dark Lord, but apparently Alexandre had sent it to step around the Pact's injunction that Harry and Jing-Xi could not speak to each other. "I think we're as safe as we'll ever be to leave the world behind for a little while."

Draco fumbled and shuffled next to him. Harry didn't know what he was doing until hands caught his chin and tilted it up. He went without protest, and blinked when the kiss landed just a little to the right of his lips.

"I'm going to miss you," Draco whispered.

And *there* it was, another of those jewel-like moments that people like Connor, who normally got to see only Draco's selfish exterior, would never understand, Harry thought, as he looped his arms around Draco's waist in return. Draco hated moments of emotional weakness, had been trained to hate them. And most of the time, he seemed to agree with and accept that training. That he could lay down those defenses with Harry in private and come out of his shell bespoke a trust that Harry couldn't blame him for not extending to other people, and felt honored to have himself.

“I’m glad it’s just for one day,” he said back, and hoped that his voice would carry all the quiet emotion he wanted it to, since Draco couldn’t see his expression.

Harry felt it then, the shifting of waves of light and power under the earth. The window of their room seemed to shimmer with gold, though Harry knew the sun couldn’t have risen enough to fill it yet. He lifted a hand to shield his eyes as sudden, searing white light flooded the room a moment later.

A calm voice spoke into his ear, a voice without gender or age or inflection.

“*It is dawn.*”

And then the white swept him, shining, away from Draco, and into a vision of what his life would have been like without him. Harry thought he felt a touch of fingers across his, a near-clasp of his wrist, and then he was gone.

In fact, the whole of *him* was gone. What awaited him was another world, another life, within the mind of a Harry Potter who had always been the way he was.

Draco leaned back and folded his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling of the four-poster bed. Greg and Vince sat by the door, keeping other people barricaded out. In fact, those “other people” were only Blaise, but Draco had wanted some time to himself in the first-year boys’ bedroom, and they insured he got it.

Draco had been feeling more and more sullen in school lately. Oh, he put effort forth in public, of course; he did well in his studies, which was expected, and he sneered at people of opposing Houses, and he made himself felt as a force in Slytherin, and he either avoided trouble altogether or made sure he didn’t get caught at it. His discontent was so private that someone could only have known about it by both knowing him inside and out *and* spying on any moment he was alone. Draco was irrationally sure that both his father and Professor Snape knew about it, but neither had approached him.

He had not expected to be so *bored* at Hogwarts.

Oh, he had thought of it, once or twice, at the beginning of the year, when he walked in through the doors of the Great Hall, and saw the Sorting Hat sitting on its stool, just the way he had expected, and everything else had happened as he expected, too—his own Sorting into Slytherin, his friends’ Sorting with him, and the sending of that damn Connor Potter, who had been so rude to Draco on the train, into Gryffindor. And since then, everything had happened as he expected.

There were *no* surprises. There were no shocks of joy or new experience, the way Draco had hoped there would be when he first left Malfoy Manor for Hogwarts. The only time he really wasn’t in control was during his encounters with Potter, and that only happened because Potter was a *brat* coddled by the whole of the school other than Professor Snape and Slytherin House.

His father would say that was good. Lucius Malfoy had spent a long time telling Draco the value of carefully-researched plans, and situations that went exactly the way you wanted them to. Surprise and interest wasn’t the point. The interest lay in watching other people do exactly as you thought they would. And later, when one had learned their patterns of behavior well enough, they would dance to cues that you gave them, to imperatives that you planted and convinced them were their own. That conception of life had helped Lucius Malfoy be a successful politician for years. Draco knew it, and he knew he was destined to follow in his father’s footsteps, too. He should have been happy that his life was the way he’d been told it would be. After all, a lack of joyful surprises meant a lack of painful and debilitating surprises, too. Slytherins took risks when necessary, but it was always good *not* to have to take risks, because they could always fail.

But—

Draco was bored.

He took a deep breath and sat up. He had to do something before his temper got the better of him and he started “acting up,” the way his father called it, just to get attention and *change* things. He’d done it sometimes while he was still a child, and it had driven his parents both mad. He couldn’t do it now that he was supposed to be in school and an adult. Besides, the problem was with him, not Hogwarts, which was exactly what he had expected.

So he would change himself.

He would ask his father to teach him more about the Dark Arts over Christmas holidays.

Harry spat blood and didn't look up. What had happened to him wasn't important. He didn't even really know why he'd been called to the Headmaster's office. This sort of thing happened every day. It was only recently that it had escalated into bloody violence, and only the worst of poor luck that Professor McGonagall had come around the corner in time to see it. Harry wouldn't fight back, though he could have blasted his assailants away from him with a spell. His mother had told him *not* to attract any attention, and Harry had done very well at that so far. For a while, Professor Snape had seemed to suspect him of hiding trained magic, but Harry had convinced him that he was innately worthless, James Potter's son and no more.

The rest of the Slytherins were convinced of that, too, which led to—this. Harry touched his jaw, and decided that it was well on the way back to normal, even without a healing potion from Madam Pomfrey. Professor McGonagall had actually dragged him to Dumbledore instead of the hospital wing after she found the fifth-year Slytherins attacking him. Harry couldn't see why. A few healing potions, a few glamours, and life would go on as normal. Everyone around him hated him, thought he didn't fit in to his House, and were more infuriated by his refusal to fight back and his silent resilience than anything else. Harry didn't care. He would get through this, because it was just another burden on the path to be got through. His goal was to serve Connor, not to make friends in a place he didn't belong.

“Harry.”

Harry looked up calmly at the Headmaster. Dumbledore was leaning forward, and his face was grave. Harry's eyebrows rose. *What's the matter with him? He knows the nature of sacrifice. He knows the importance of my mission. Nothing can be changed. But he looks as though something can.*

“I have never wanted to contest the Sorting Hat's judgment,” Dumbledore said, slowly, as if he were feeling out the confines of unfamiliar territory. “But now—I feel I must. I have never seen a student less suited to his House.” He paused, but Harry didn't volunteer anything. He wasn't supposed to complain. It would draw attention. “Harry, do you feel you belong in Slytherin?”

Someone had asked him outright, and that person was a Light wizard. That meant he could respond.

“No, sir,” Harry said quietly. He heard Professor McGonagall, standing off to the side, let loose a victorious sniff. Harry gave her a sidelong glance. She'd given his attackers detention in such a cold tone that he had been surprised to look at the walls and find them still stone instead of ice. He had been more surprised that she bothered, though. Why should she care if the older Slytherins wanted to discipline him?

“And why not, Harry?” Dumbledore prompted gently, stealing Harry's attention back.

Harry turned around. “I have no friends,” he said simply. “No one trusts me because I'm the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, and they think I'm there to spy on them. Professor Snape hates me because of who our father is, and our godfather. I don't wish to practice Dark Arts. I don't like or trust anyone there.”

Dumbledore's mouth had tightened further and further as Harry recited the list. Then he said, “Professor Snape has not come to me with any—comments on your treatment there.”

“Oh, he knows about it,” Harry reassured him, worried that the Headmaster would think his professor's perceptiveness was slipping.

“He *what*?” McGonagall sounded like a true lioness when she growled.

“Why hasn't he stopped it, Harry?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. “He hates me because of who our father is, sir. I did say that,” he added, wondering if they thought he'd lied. He didn't want to become suspected of practicing deception, because that would make people think of him as Dark, and because it might lead them to ask what else he was hiding.

“This goes too far, Albus,” McGonagall hissed, like a teakettle.

“It does.” Dumbledore sighed. “In this case, I am making a transfer for the student's health. School records will show that Harry Potter was Sorted first into Slytherin. Due to irreconcilable differences with the students and the Head of House involved, however, he was moved to Gryffindor for his own safety.” He looked at Harry with kind eyes. “I trust that will not be a problem for you, Harry?”

A tiny flame sprang to life inside him. Harry could not remember such pure joy anywhere in his life. Most of what he had was the quiet contentment that came from a job well done, a duty fulfilled.

He nodded. "That will be more than enough for me, sir," he said softly.

Draco hesitated for a long moment, heart beating so hard that he was convinced someone would come down the hall at any moment and hear it. Then he shook his head, reminded himself that people who cast those sorts of spells in Hogwarts were *rare*, not common, and moved forward.

His father had given him a simple task. He had *trusted* Draco. He'd done so since Draco went to him during Christmas holidays last year and confessed his boredom and his desire to be trusted with something life-changing, something important. And Draco wasn't going to betray his father's trust.

He arrived at the portrait that guarded Gryffindor Tower, and smirked. It had been a good idea to come this late at night, despite the risk of being caught by patrolling Prefects and professors. The fat woman in the picture sat asleep, chin dangling on her chest. She didn't wake as Draco whispered the password he'd heard Neville Longbottom whimper the other night when he stumbled back to the Tower after falling asleep in the library, and thus she didn't see that the one requesting entrance wasn't one of her precious Gryffindors. She just swung outward, and Draco climbed in and looked around carefully. No. No one in the—very garish—common room.

He reached down, eyes on the set of stairs he needed to climb, and carefully cast the Hermes Charm on his trainers. He'd practiced and practiced this. Lucius had assigned Draco his task, but left the mechanics of accomplishing it up to him. That meant that he had to be the one responsible for finding the right spells, and thinking up *every* problem that could deter him and a way around it. Draco was not sure that he always liked the sheer effort involved, but he had to admit it was much more exciting than the boredom that had plagued him last year.

He rose gently from the ground, the wings on either side of his trainers straining and flapping. This charm wasn't often used because it didn't last long, so Draco shot quickly over the staircase to the first-year girls' room, which would have turned to a ramp and dumped him down it, not to mention blaring with alarm wards, if he'd tried to just walk up it. He landed safely on the top step just as the wings disappeared. Draco sighed, shook his head, and made his way to the door of the room. He was prepared to cast spells to dissipate the wards, but there were no wards here other than the general school ones. Draco snorted in disdain.

He did have to wait a moment for his hand to stop shaking before he could ease the door open.

He easily saw the Weasley girl, of course. The long red hair revealed her through her partially-closed curtains. Draco rolled his eyes and crept to her side.

Yes. There on the table next to her bed was the small black tome his father had described to him. Draco relaxed. The first part of the task his father had asked of him was complete—just to make sure that the girl Weasel still had the book. Lucius hadn't explained the book's importance, and Draco hadn't dared ask.

The second part was more complicated. Draco stood still, eyes half-closed, and recalled all the bad things he'd heard about Weasleys growing up: how poor they were, how they refused to stop having children, how they disgraced their pure blood by associating with Muggles and Muggle-lovers. Draco hissed under his breath, and then carefully cast the compulsion charm on Weasley.

She stirred, and Draco flinched, drawing into himself. But she only rolled over, sighed, and went more firmly back to sleep.

Draco nodded. The compulsion made it impossible for her to part with the book now, even if she felt the inclination to do so. That was all his father had asked of him, and Draco had accomplished it swiftly and silently. Lucius was going to be so proud of him.

And so would the Dark Lord. Though Draco hadn't asked questions, he had eyes and ears that worked. He knew this had something to do with the Heir of Slytherin and the Chamber of Secrets.

He slipped carefully out of the room, made sure to cast a spell that would remove any trace of his magic from the hallway, and then used the Hermes Charm again to reach the bottom of the stairs. From there, it was easy enough to get out of the Gryffindor common room, and he made it back to the dungeons intact.

He went to sleep with a small smile on his lips, imagining all the while the look that would be in Lucius's eyes when Draco's letter reporting success reached him.

Harry had a word, and he put it in the forefront of his thoughts, and the word *stayed* there.

No.

He lay in his bed in the hospital wing furiously fighting the storm that wanted to descend on him. The storm had probably really started brewing after he and Sylarana had managed to lock Tom Riddle in the box. They'd kept him there for almost six months, but then he had started breaking free, possessing Harry, and using him to let the basilisk free from the Chamber and Petrify people. Neither Harry nor Sylarana had known. Then, finally, when he'd acted against Connor, they'd become aware of him, and fought him. He'd died, and so had the basilisk, with help from Connor and Fawkes, but before he did, he opened and emptied the box. The mental strain of trying to hold the box shut against Tom's power had killed Sylarana.

And now Harry's mind was full of images and pictures that he didn't want to see, and thoughts he didn't want to think. They had words mingled in them like "abuse." A rage so cold that Harry hadn't stopped shivering since the Chamber wanted him to rise up and use his magic like a Dark Lord.

No.

Harry would not. Never. No. He would not.

He swam among the shards of his splintered mind, and, carefully, he picked them up and put them back together. A golden light and a singing voice sometimes appeared to help him, to show him where the pieces fit best. Across hours, across days, while he lay in the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey and everyone else assumed he suffered from some sort of persistent magical fever, Harry carefully rebuilt his mind, centering it around his loyalty to his brother.

He did not want anyone to see into his head; he avoided eye contact with both Snape and Dumbledore when they came into the hospital wing. *No*. They couldn't see. They would say that he was evil for ever thinking such thoughts about his parents, who had only tried their best for Connor and for the world. And Harry knew he was Dark, but he did not think he could stand condemnation for it right now. The best possible apology would be to heal himself in silence, and so thoroughly that they never knew he had been wounded.

He healed, and healed, and worked, and worked, and finally it happened. He was whole again. He still loved his parents and Connor as much as he ever had, so Riddle hadn't succeeded in turning him against them. And his shivering subsided, and he sat on the rage.

He built a new box, a sturdier box, and when the end of the term came, he was ready to go home with his parents and his brother. He knew that he would never lose control like that again. He was deeply ashamed that he'd ever thought those things in the first place. He didn't want power; he didn't want the freedom that Tom Riddle's voice had whispered of, because that would mean the end of freedom for other people; he didn't want the rage. He wanted to serve his brother, and live in peace.

The rage stayed in the box. It always would.

It didn't take much more than a small twist of his wand to cast the spell. And, once it was cast, things took their natural course.

Draco watched with—well, call it indifference—as Connor Potter fell from his broom to the ground below. After a moment's stunned silence, because no one had ever seen the Gryffindor Seeker fall before, the crowd began roaring, shouting, and surging to its feet. The Gryffindors were shouting the loudest, of course, screaming about Slytherin sabotage, even though their team had been playing Hufflepuff.

Draco sat back, twirling his wand between his fingers, and arched a brow. He'd done no more than Confound Potter for a moment, and from that height, no one would be able to tell that was what had happened. And, of course, Potter had hit the ground hard enough to scramble his brains, which was what Lucius had hoped for. The savior would probably not lie in a coma forever—they would manage to pull him out of it—but he could easily have permanent brain damage.

And if he didn't...

Well. Lucius had some plans for that eventuality, too. And he would send his son to fulfill them if necessary. Either way, their precious Potter would emerge from his third year with less than the mental capacity his designated role needed.

Draco rose to his feet. He was thirteen, an accomplished master of Dark Arts already, and promised to the Dark Lord's service when he returned. He could cast a spell that would cause the injury of a classmate and not care that much.

He loved his father with all his heart.

Horror, screaming horror all around Harry, and he knew what would work, he knew what he *must* do, but love stayed his hand and forced the words out of his mouth.

“Sirius, please, fight him, I know you can do it, I know—“

“He cannot hear you,” Voldemort's voice said from Sirius's mouth, laughing, cold. “He is buried too deep. He did try to take control of this body, but he moved too quickly, Potter.” He turned an almost tender gaze on Connor, curled in the corner. “Grief unmanned him.”

Harry didn't listen, wouldn't listen. Voldemort's corrupt justice ritual held him motionless in the center of the Shrieking Shack, but he'd left Harry the ability to speak. He found it amusing. Harry went on pleading with Sirius, asking him to fight, whispering for it, giving him Gryffindor memories, letting him know how much he was loved.

And then the moment came when Sirius's soul shone in Voldemort's eyes, and Harry knew it was the last time.

He exerted all his power, all the magic he'd never used, but chained up and ignored, because to use it was to call himself Dark. It flowed through him like a black tsunami, anxious to be free. He snapped out of the corrupt justice ritual, though he heard Connor scream as he did it, and knew that he'd probably fractured a bond between them. But better the broken bond than a dead brother or a doomed world.

He had his wand in his hand, and Voldemort gaped, and, through his eyes, Sirius nodded his willing permission to die.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” Harry cried.

Riding all his hatred, all his love, the Killing Curse blasted out of his cypress wand and hit Sirius in the chest. He fell dead in an instant, the light in his eyes snuffed out. Harry wasted no time, but turned his wand on the locket that lay against Sirius's chest, bubbling with enough darkness that Harry didn't think it was “dead” yet.

He ended up not using a spell after all. He couldn't think of one potent enough. Instead, he used his magic, a sheer wandless snap, and both the locket and the darkness bubbling around it ceased to exist.

And then there was silence.

Harry, panting, fell to his knees for a moment, then crawled towards Connor and undid the bonds that tied him. His brother refused to look at him. Then Harry turned to the Pensieve that sat next to Voldemort's heels, because he *had* to see.

In silence, he watched Voldemort go into the house at Godric's Hollow with Peter Pettigrew. The Killing Curse touched his forehead, and the second one touched Connor's, and then, at the exact moment when it did, green light rebounded from the infant Harry and flew back to strike Voldemort, locking all three of them into a bent triangle.

And Harry *knew*. His mind, too skilled in book learning, in untangling riddles, darted off, grabbed the necessary strands, and pulled them together to present him with an alternate version of the prophecy in which he was not Connor's guardian, but the one meant to defeat Voldemort.

He waited a long moment, his head bowed, listening to his brother panting in the corner.

Then he upended the Pensieve, and watched as the silvery liquid trickled away into the corners of the Shack.

No.

He set the word of his heart against the vision, and limped over to curl an arm around Connor's shoulders, helping him to his feet. Along the way, he tamed and soothed his magic, making it lie still again. He would not use it, he *would* not, he *would* not.

He was not the Boy-Who-Lived, because he refused to be. Prophecies could shift, but Harry intended to see that this one did not. It would stay right where it was supposed to be, and not choose him as its younger instrument.

Besides, it made more sense that it should stay where it was. Who in the world loved Harry for himself, and could have stood at his right shoulder?

Connor didn't look at him as Harry helped him out into the sunlight. Harry knew why. He had killed Sirius, and that would stand between them forever.

Harry did not care. Connor was still alive, and the rage and the magic were locked in the box again. Everything was as it should be. He did not need his brother's love, only his life.

Draco frowned and shifted one foot in the mud. It was under the trailing hem of his robe, so his father couldn't see it moving. That was a very good thing. His father stood masked and cowed not too far from his side, and he would notice in a moment if his son did anything that suggested he was less than happy with the ceremony.

Of course Draco was happy with the ceremony. In recognition of his accomplishments over the years—including making the Boy-Who-Lived an idiot due to brain damage in his third year and insuring that he couldn't ever foil the Dark Lord again, as Potter had managed with the diary—Draco was going to become the youngest Death Eater ever. The Dark Lord had developed a spell that would give him a Dark Mark visible only to those who loyally served him. Thus he could serve his Lord without giving too much away, including revealing a snake and skull in a school full of curious people who would pry where they were not welcome.

He simply hadn't expected to be so bothered by the details of the ceremony.

The Dark Lord had needed the blood of an enemy to complete his resurrection ceremony, but though he would have liked to use the Boy-Who-Lived, Connor Potter was now too tightly guarded to make it practical. In the end, Mulciber, disguised as Moody, had managed to capture McGonagall and bring her to the graveyard where the Dark Lord's father was buried. Now, she writhed and screamed on the altar next to the grave, though a *Silencio* had muffled her cries so that she would not interrupt the Dark Lord's punishment of his disloyal underlings.

Draco had no mask yet. He could look at her, and she had seen him. Her eyes had narrowed, and then she had spat several insulting things about the Malfoy line, before the Dark Lord put her under the Cruciatius and left her like that.

"Draco."

He dropped instinctively to one knee. His father had trained him well. When someone spoke his name in that tone, the time to ask questions had passed. "My Lord," he said, and knew his voice was the right combination of submission and confidence. For a moment, he felt his father shift, his robe brushing Draco's, and that sent a warm bolt through him.

For his father's approval, he could face anything, including what he thought he would be asked to do in a moment.

"Come here to me."

Draco rose and walked towards his Lord, holding his eyes because the Dark Lord hadn't said not to. That lipless mouth slid into a smile. Draco felt a shudder run up his spine, and told himself sternly that it didn't matter what his Lord looked like. The power around him, like the waves of a sunless sea, was the important thing, and it was power that Draco could shelter beneath for the rest of his life. Already the addiction to it crept into his bones and blood.

"All Death Eaters must pass an initiation before they can truly become my servants," his Lord whispered to him, mockingly, caressingly.

Draco nodded. "I understand, my Lord." He was fourteen, but Lucius had explained as many details as he rightfully could to him.

"Take your wand, Draco, and kill the Gryffindor bitch for me," said the hissing voice, softer than sand.

Draco nodded again, and drew his wand, and faced the altar. The long yew wand descended, lifting the Silencing Charm on McGonagall. Now Draco could hear her screams, the agonized cries of a maddened animal.

He held her eyes, and forced himself to remember every single time she had stood in front of Transfiguration and frowned at him. There was every time she had been unfair to Slytherins, too, and the times she grudgingly admitted that Slytherin had indeed won the Quidditch matches between Gryffindor and Slytherin. If she could not catch them cheating, she did not deserve to know.

Draco thought of all that, and made it *not matter*. Why should it mean anything, who she had been? She was now the sacrifice for his initiation into the Death Eaters, and that was all.

He raised his wand and spoke the Killing Curse without thought, lost in a sea of indifference. She slumped and died of a jet of green light, and Draco turned and bowed calmly to his Lord.

“I notice that you did not make her suffer more first, Draco,” his Lord whispered.

“She had madness in her eyes, my Lord,” Draco said, with complete honesty. “She would not have noticed any pain curse I used. And I do not think that I can cast Cruciatius as well as you can, nor shall ever be able to do so.”

The red eyes gleamed. That answer pleased him very much. Draco felt another warm bolt, and knew he’d found another person he wanted—needed—to impress.

“Very good, Draco,” his Lord said. “Kneel.”

Draco knelt.

“Do you understand, Harry?”

Harry nodded fiercely. “Of course I do!”

Dumbledore’s face softened. “That makes me gladder than you can know, Harry. I know what sacrifices you have made for our cause, and I am loathe to demand another of you. But, in truth, the situation is intractable, and there is no other way.”

“I understand, sir,” Harry whispered. And he did. It didn’t make him *happy*, in the same way that being suspected of being a Dark wizard because he spoke Parseltongue didn’t make him *happy*. But his happiness was not a factor that entered into decisions made by the side of the Light, and that was the way it should be. They had so many more important people to serve, and his effectiveness as a weapon depended on his staying in the shadows.

There were many people in the Order of the Phoenix who had expressed a concern that Harry’s killing of Sirius at the end of last year showed Dark tendencies. So they had argued with Dumbledore about keeping Harry free of Azkaban, and in the end, he had proposed a compromise. That compromise was to be executed now.

Harry watched in silence as Connor came into the office. His brother wouldn’t speak to or look at him. Harry’s heart ached, but he felt a kind of sad pride, too. Connor was true to his ideals and the Light, as he’d been raised, and in the world of the Light, there was no place for what Harry had done. At least he was still pure and innocent. At least Harry had managed to achieve that.

“Connor,” Dumbledore said. “We know that you don’t think your brother can be trusted with his magic any more, thanks to—last year.” He was delicate enough not to mention Sirius’s name, at least.

Connor’s shoulders hunched—at the mention of his brother, Harry had to note, not the end of the sentence—but he nodded.

“Therefore,” said Dumbledore, in an even gentler tone than he’d used with Harry, “we have decided to put Harry under an Unbreakable Vow. He will swear his magic over to you, to be used at your command. He will never again be able to use a Dark spell, if that is what you demand of him. At the same time, you can draw freely on his power, and use it to protect yourself during the Tournament.”

Connor looked up, and then turned his eyes to Harry. Harry basked in his brother’s gaze, and nodded to show that he’d agreed to this and even welcomed it.

“But—“ Connor began, and then fell silent.

“Yes, it does sound barbaric,” Dumbledore said. “But it is the only compromise the Order of the Phoenix will accept, and, frankly, it will make Harry feel better about himself, Connor. And since Harry is supposed to be your guardian, according to the prophecy, it makes sense for him to assume this position.”

Connor gnawed his lip for a moment, then nodded fiercely. “I’ll do it.”

They knelt, and Dumbledore drew his wand to be their Bonder. Harry reached out, and held Connor’s hand, and met his eyes, and thought, with sudden clarity, *This means the magic can never come out of the box again. I don’t have to fight it anymore. I’ll be free in my chains.*

The relief of that was so great he had to shut his eyes, but he opened them again as Connor incanted the first two vows, repeating what Dumbledore told him: that Harry’s magic was Connor’s to use as he willed, and that Harry could never use a Dark spell again. Connor looked up at the end, though.

“What’s the third vow?” he asked.

“Whatever you choose it to be.” Dumbledore smiled at him. “I trust you, and I know that Harry does, too.” Harry nodded like a marionette when Connor looked at him, just in case his brother was in any doubt.

“All right.” Connor took a deep breath. “From this moment forward, Harry, I want you to swear that you won’t speak Parseltongue to anyone, and that if a snake talks to you, you won’t answer.”

Gratitude came like a starburst from inside Harry’s chest. At a stroke, Connor had freed him from his worry about the Darkest gift he carried.

He made the vow, and the fire glowed all around their joined hands. Harry watched it, and thought the separate strands were like the shine of candles of peace.

“That is not the way, Draco.” Hawthorn Parkinson never dared sound *annoyed* with him, but she could sound weary, and she did so now. Draco bit his lip and tried to stand straight, though his anxiety was making it hard for him to do so. He wanted to hunch over and try to look small the way he had when he attracted his father’s disapproval as a child.

He reminded himself that he had Lucius’s approval, had had it for several years now, and gave a little nod to Hawthorn. He was fifteen, and the Malfoy heir. Fifteen was the magical age of inheritance among some of the pureblood families even now. Practically an adult, he could not disappoint his father.

“I am ready,” he said, as calmly as he could.

“Good.” Hawthorn stepped out of his way. They stood in one of the clean, cool underground rooms of the Dark Lord’s new fortress, which had apparently once been the site of some Muggle religion. Draco knew little and cared to know less about Muggle religions. He only knew the walls were comfortingly solid stone, reminding him of Hogwarts, and that in front of him, on an altar-like slab resembling the one where he had killed McGonagall, lay the woman he was meant to practice the blood curses on. “Now try the Blood-Burning Curse.”

Draco grimaced. That spell was harder than all the others, invented by the madman Evan Rosier. Even Hawthorn, Red Death though she was, had trouble with it. But he had said that he would master the spell, and so he would.

He focused on the woman with long bright hair on the altar—her name was Ignifer Apollonis, and though she was sworn to the Dark, she had refused to serve his Lord—and whispered the incantation.

Ignifer screamed as her blood began to burn along her veins. By now, she had no pride left, and it was easy to make her cry out.

Draco stared. He did not believe at first that he had done it, even when Hawthorn touched his shoulder and nodded in approbation. “Very good, Draco,” she murmured, ending the spell. “Now I want you to try it in combination with *Sanguinolente*. I’ll heal her before she can die. Do you think you can do that?”

Draco nodded absently, still caught in the middle of his shock. He had felt nothing but the same indifference with which he had killed Professor McGonagall in the graveyard last year. His Lord wanted all his Death Eaters to have a love of torture and killing,

but so far it evaded Draco.

But then he thought of the half-smile that would overcome Lucius's mouth when he let himself show pride in his son. He thought of those wintry gray eyes softening enough to show him something of the man behind. Draco's indifference swelled into determination to do better.

He nodded again to Hawthorn and set his feet. He might not care very much about making his enemies suffer, but he cared a great deal about his father's regard. He could do this. He was the Malfoy heir, the sole scion of his father's legacy, and Lucius Malfoy could torture like an artist. Draco must learn how to do so.

"Now, Harry!"

Harry sent his magic flowing to Connor, watching tensely as his brother dashed away among the shelves of prophecies in the Department of Mysteries. Only Connor and Voldemort could touch the prophecy that concerned both of them, and his brother had come here because he wanted to hear the whole thing. He had started distrusting Dumbledore and even Lily in the last year and longed to know whether the words they had given him were true or not.

The problem was that there were three Death Eaters behind them, including Bellatrix Lestrange, and Harry, with his magic occupied in protecting his brother from the ones ahead, couldn't defend himself at all.

A bright purple curse struck over his head and hit the floor near him. Harry dropped and rolled. He could hear flames creeping nearer the prophecies, and abruptly had an idea. No, he couldn't defend himself with magic thanks to the Unbearable Vow, but he could at least make sure that Hermione and Ron, who had come with them to the Department of Mysteries, were safe, and create a distraction.

He reached out and set his shoulder to the shelf next to him. In seconds, it wavered—the shelves weren't that heavy, since they simply held the fragile globes of prophecies, not tomes as in the Hogwarts Library—and then began to fall.

Harry watched, fascinated despite himself, as the prophecies fell with it, their clear sides shining like tears. They smashed on the floor, and the ghosts of the visions inherent in them began to rise from the remains, their lips moving and the voices of the Seers, some shrieking, some mumbling, some clear as trumpets, mingling. Two voices cursed, and Harry knew he'd successfully slowed at least a few of the Death Eaters down.

Then he heard a pained scream.

He whipped around, and saw Bellatrix Lestrange holding Hermione under the Cruciatu, laughing cruelly. Harry knew what the Cruciatu felt like. He'd felt it himself last year in the graveyard, and he'd been lucky that Voldemort succeeded in doing no worse to him before Connor came charging in to rescue him.

He flung out a hand, instinctively trying to stop Hermione's pain.

And he could do nothing, because his magic was with Connor.

Harry couldn't just approach Bellatrix, either, because he couldn't hurt her without the ability to curse, and there was a high chance he would die. He was supposed to sacrifice his life to save Connor, not Hermione.

He hesitated, his training struggling with the instinct to intervene and save a fellow Gryffindor in trouble.

And then Bellatrix spoke the Killing Curse, and Hermione lay as lifeless as Sirius had two years earlier.

Harry closed his eyes.

Draco cursed in shock and barely ducked around the corner in time. The green light of the Killing Curse cut the darkness around him, a silent flash; no words other than the incantation accompanied it. When it faded, Draco stood shaking in the darkness, and realized exactly how close he had come to losing his life.

He'd been assigned, during his sixth year, to run a subtle test of Snape's loyalty, and see how well he truly adhered to the Dark

Lord's call. What Draco had found was inconclusive. In the end, he'd decided that he could only be sure by gaining access to Snape's private rooms, and he'd tried to Stun his teacher and look over the evidence at his leisure. If he found something incriminating, he could inform his Lord. If he found nothing, a quick *Obliviate* would take care of things, or perhaps even an explanation. Draco knew Snape was cautiously fond of him, and he had run similar risks while a young initiate in the Dark Lord's service. He might understand why Draco had done this.

But the Stunning spell had failed, and Snape had given Draco no chance to explain before he began to fight.

Snape was a brilliant duelist. Draco had heard that all his life, but never thought about what it meant. Now he did: his own curses turned with hardly a blink, his wand nearly slapped out of his hand before he could complete the *Avada Kedavra* incantation, Snape's composure eerily refusing to falter even when Draco wounded him. And he bore a bloody gash on his chest thanks to a near-collision with *Sectumsempra*, one of Snape's own personal invented spells.

He could feel Snape's magic from around the corner, silent and deadly as a hunting beast. Draco shuddered. It was the first time he'd fought a wizard so much stronger than himself, and he wasn't enjoying it.

Then Snape hissed, "Draco."

Frustratingly, his voice came from every direction. Draco shivered. He was not fool enough to answer.

"I know what you were doing, little snakeling," Snape whispered. "Do you not suppose I know that the Dark Lord has doubted my loyalty? Shall I tell you the same story I told him, little snakeling?"

Draco shuffled a bit closer to the corner, wondering if he could fire a spell around it and hit Snape before the man knew he was there.

A loop of rope shot around the corner from the opposite direction and curled about his neck, choking off his breath. Then he flipped around as neatly as if his personal gravity had been reversed, and Draco found himself hanging from the ceiling, trussed hand and foot. His wand clattered away from his grasp and rolled into the darkness.

Snape stepped towards Draco, shaking his head. He didn't look angry, merely disgusted.

"Your task was to spy on me and make sure of my loyalty," he told Draco. "And *my* task was to answer you back and curb your confidence. You have been growing too reckless, little snakeling, taking risks that will not answer." He paused meaningfully. "Your father as well as the Dark Lord asked me to keep an eye on you. I can only assume that their motivations do not differ."

Draco swallowed and nodded as best he could around the rope. Lucius had told him more than once that if Draco failed to live up to the high standards of the Malfoy family, he deserved no better than death. Draco's mother had sometimes turned away when her husband said things like that, but she had never disagreed.

Snape raised an eyebrow, and the ropes uncoiled and dropped Draco to the ground. Draco didn't cry out as he landed, though the fall bruised him. He sat up and waited, head bowed. He knew what was coming.

"You have learned to make others suffer," Snape said, in a voice barely distinguishable from the hush of blood along Draco's veins. "However, you have learned very little suffering of your own." He raised his wand.

Draco set himself to endure.

In the silence, during the long hours, Harry fought and fought with himself.

He had thought that, after he gave up control of his magic to Connor with the Unbreakable Vow, he would never be troubled by his Dark rage and Dark thoughts again. But the death of Hermione last year had unleashed something in him. He had gone, screaming, after Bellatrix, and he would have been killed if Connor hadn't come back just then with the prophecy and held her off.

And since then, Harry was conscious of the box in his head for the first time in years.

Something inside the box kept knocking. It wanted out.

Every night, he fought in silence with himself, sitting up on his bed in the Gryffindor sixth-year boys' room, staring out the windows of the Tower. The stars were serene and distant. They did not help him. Harry had asked his parents for help, but James pretended not to know what he was talking about—he had his own ghosts to contend with, Harry knew, his own darkness—and Lily simply patted his shoulder and smiled at him with soft eyes and reminded him that it couldn't be any other way, that they *had* to be sure he wasn't Dark after he murdered Sirius, or he would have been sent to Azkaban.

Sometimes Harry wanted to shout at them that it had been Voldemort in Sirius's body, and didn't they understand that?

But he knew that was a sign of his sickness. He was hopelessly sick, corrupt down to the bone. It could be the only reason he was thinking thoughts like this now, missing his magic with a longing that left him unable to do anything but shake in bed for days, and actually paying attention to Ginny Weasley in such a way that sometimes it distracted him from Connor.

He had found a solution, though, a mental technique described in a book on Light magic. It would work, he was certain. Connor let him have his magic during the nights, and this was nothing to do with Dark spells or with Parseltongue.

Harry closed his eyes and collected the deviant thoughts and Dark leanings into a small pile. Then he imagined his devotion to Connor and all that was good and right as a brilliant fire, a beam of the sun magnified through glass.

He burned the bad parts of himself. He pared himself down until he was the shining weapon of the Light, the part of himself under Unbreakable Vows to Connor, and nothing else.

He sat there, and did it. He knew he would have to do it night after night, until he could no longer hear the knocking from inside the box, or the frenzied music he sometimes thought he heard blowing among the stars at the end of April and on Midwinter Night.

“—by the order of the Dark Lord of Britain and Ireland, soon to be Dark Lord of Europe—“

Draco stood stiffly proud at his Lord's side. Only a small honor guard got to be this close to their Lord and the prisoner he was going to torment this morning: the idiot Potter boy, his head hanging off to the side and a slow line of drool sliding down his chin. Everyone else could watch, of course, gathered in the slimy mud that was the churned battlefield around the conquered Hogwarts, but few were this close. Draco's father, his aunt Bellatrix, and Snape made up the rest of the inner circle.

“—for crimes against His exalted person and for interfering with the continuance of His rightful reign—“

Draco stared at Potter. He tried to see some spark of the boy he had once hated in those glazed hazel eyes, and could not. He didn't even feel pity. Dull, crawling indifference consumed him.

“—sentenced, to die.”

Bellatrix stepped forward. She would torture Potter, and it would take him hours to stop screaming. It would take him days to actually *die*, of course. The Dark Lord knew how to make his examples. Draco still thought his ears were ringing from Dumbledore's screams, and from Lily Potter's, though technically Lily wasn't dead yet. There was still enough of her left for people like Crabbe and Goyle to enjoy.

Draco cared little for that. He had learned to inflict suffering and death, to come to the edge of them himself and not to betray his Lord, but he valued them as skills, not as part of life, like Bellatrix did. And he was proud to serve his Lord, but he didn't love his power the way some Death Eaters did; he was content to be near the shadow of those gigantic wings.

His reward was in the glance that Lucius gave him every now and then, the way he acknowledged that Draco was there and a worthy son.

Voldemort was his Lord, Draco thought. But Lucius was his *father*, and he had done all this for him.

For his approval, to have a place in his heart. Lucius knew best.

The first scream rang out. Draco looked boredly back at Potter as a light rain began to fall. He supposed his robes would be coated with mud before the day was out, but, well. The house elves of Hogwarts could make themselves useful to their new masters by cleaning them.

On Midwinter Night in the same year as Voldemort's defeat, which was his and Connor's last year at Hogwarts, Harry climbed the Astronomy Tower.

He could not keep indoors. He had tried. The school was holding a Yule Ball like the one during fourth year, and Harry wanted to be there, among lights and companionship, watching as his brother whirled across the floor with Parvati Patil, to whom he was engaged to be married this time next year.

But he couldn't, even with his magic safely bound, and so he had slipped away at last and climbed to the place he could be closest to the stars. And to the darkness between the stars, though he tried not to think about that.

He was shivering convulsively, even though the wind that blew didn't feel cold. It felt hot, like the breath of a mighty beast down the back of his neck. No one had seen him go, he knew. No one cared that much. Harry was his brother's shadow, his weapon, of account and notice in the same way that a shining sword at his side was. Everyone admired it, but no one thought it had a brain of its own. Even Ginny had given up when Harry began to ignore her last year.

He could feel the wood of his box rotting.

Harry closed his eyes. But he couldn't cry. He had forsaken tears. There was the wind above him, and the courtyard far below, and the rotting wood inside. He heard the muffled rhythm of his Dark magic's knocking night and day. He might die, if it burst free from his control, given the Unbreakable Vow. But the Vow was a fragile barrier to trust the safety of Hogwarts to. Dark magic could do unpredictable things against Light spells.

And there was the surge of strength Harry had felt when Voldemort died, and the voice in his ear that had whispered, *You are my heir*, even as the prophecy came true. He hadn't told anyone about that, of course. They would think it was Dark, and Harry wanted to prove he was a weapon. That was what he was.

The wild Dark—he could name it in his thoughts, if not aloud—sang above him, and now and then he glanced up and saw a wolf with green eyes and a silver lightning bolt scar watching him. The last time he saw it, it had winked at him.

He wondered, if he leaped from the Tower, would he fall or fly?

Slowly, he climbed up on the battlements. The stone was cold under his feet. The wind lipped at his ears. The stars shook overhead like cymbals.

Inside him, a fist punched through the rotten wood of the box.

Draco opened his eyes, his heart shuddering. He knew it must be sunset, or the visions wouldn't have let him go. He lay on his back on a bed, he knew that much, and the motionless weight beside him was Harry. Given how dark the room was, Draco doubted that he could see him even if he looked.

And then the weight came alive with a strangled cry, and Draco found himself wrapped in a pair of arms so tight he could barely breathe. He slowly gathered Harry to himself, his own heart going fast enough to make his skin shudder over it.

"Oh, Merlin, my life was worthless without you there," Harry babbled to him, voice full of terror and tears. "I can't believe—it wasn't—Draco, Draco, I *need* you so much."

Draco whispered, "I know. I know. Shhh. I've got you, Harry. I felt the same thing." He held on as tight as he could, and reminded himself over and over that he wasn't the boy who had existed as a pawn under the domination of his father and been utterly indifferent to torture and death. That had been the ritual's version. He was himself, and he was real, and he held Harry in his arms. Harry had helped him defy his father and become his own person, but that was in the past. They were *living* now, as well as struggling.

"I was dying," Harry breathed. "I was a weapon, and the wild Dark was calling me, and I either committed suicide or went mad and destroyed them all in the middle of my seventh year, I'm not sure which. I didn't have you to help me make friends in Slytherin, or to shelter me at the end of second year, or to teach me what it meant to be human. I just—I had—*fuck*," he ended, on a broken note, and burrowed his head into Draco's chest.

“And I wasn’t my own person without you, either,” Draco whispered. “I may still not be, but at least I’m more than the Malfoy heir my father would have trained me into.” He remembered, then, how glad he had been to be tossed a scrap of approval from his father, and his skin crawled as if it would hump up over his shoulders. He held it down. He felt the temptation to toss Harry aside and retch up the contents of his stomach, but that could wait, too.

“Can’t we turn on a light?” Harry whispered back.

“No,” Draco said, though he felt the same yearning himself. “Not until midnight.”

“Then I’ll use my hands to feel you as much as I can,” said Harry, and he locked his arms around Draco more tightly than ever. There was a pause, and when he spoke again, he sounded a bit stronger, but Draco knew he was very far from repairing his barriers. “Draco—talk to me. Tell me what your vision was like. *Tell me.*”

Draco wondered if Harry wanted to hear about his vision for its own sake or to hear his voice, and then decided it might be something even simpler than that: the human motive to comfort and be comforted.

“All right,” he said. “I was bored during my first year, just like I thought I would be without you there to help make it more fun...”

So he went on, telling his story, interspersed with Harry’s indignant or reassuring little comments, waiting for the end of visions, waiting for midnight and the light.

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: Bulstrode to Yaxley

February 7th, 1997

Dear Lazuli Yaxley:

You have no particular reason to look upon my request favorably, I suppose, but it is a fact that we are both allies of Harry vates, and I am confident that no one else will make this request of you.

You have had time, by now, to examine your sister Indigena’s house and garden, to learn what treasures she left, and what heirlooms for your family. What I am interested in is not a jewel, or a statue, or a portrait, but a plant. It would be a vine, dark green, with a thin stripe of silver running down the middle of each tendril. It may be growing potted or as a wild plant in the gardens or greenhouses. It trails low along the ground, but may rear up when magically commanded. I suspect, however, that the silver stripe is your best means of identifying it.

I am afraid that I cannot tell you why I need cuttings of this particular vine. Be assured that I will not use them alone; young Neville Longbottom is an expert in Herbology and will help me care for the plants as they should be cared for. And be assured I intend to use them for no malicious purpose.

Sometimes, there are things our vates needs that he does not know he needs, and which he would never ask for. I intend to use the vines to secure him one of those things. I cannot tell him the plan; he would oppose it, out of his own unselfishness. He has changed much of late, but I have reason to believe he would never let me do this.

Please let me know very soon whether you will send clippings of the vine to me or not. Time is of the essence.

I hope your daughter is well.

In the name of the Dark,

Henrietta Bulstrode.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Caught on the Hop

Connor sighed loudly and put the book aside. He’d been researching the Switching Potion, hoping to find some wrinkle in it that Harry didn’t know about and which would convince him to use it again to give Connor the knowledge of the pureblood rituals.

Just for a little while. Just for a few hours. There was a gathering tonight—apparently, Harry’s enemies and friends alike were interested in setting up an election for Minister as soon as possible, taking away unofficial duties from people who shouldn’t be performing them, and making competent people official—and Connor was confident that Harry could survive without the rituals. He didn’t think *he* could.

What he read, however, was the information that Harry had already told him about the Switching Potion. The two people who would consume it had to be linked in two ways, one of which must be a blood bond. It was fatal to take another potion within five minutes of the Switching Potion, to consume more than exactly half the draft, or to take it when the bonds between the two people weren’t strong enough. A way to die a horrible screaming death, Connor had managed to surmise, though the books he had looked at were coy about that.

Everything else concerned the brewing process and the way that the two people involved had to concentrate so that the stones filled with their magical essences dropped into the potion. On the bright side, Connor had found nothing that said it was fatal to take the Switching Potion more than once or twice.

On the dark side, that would not convince Harry to switch knowledge with him.

As if he were lurking about in the corridor outside the library waiting for the perfect moment to intrude and make a nuisance of himself, Harry opened the door and leaned in. “Connor, Parvati says that she isn’t going to appear with you looking like a ragamuffin,” he said. “You need to get bathed and dress. The gathering is only in a few hours.” He spoke as if bored, only passing along a message, but his eyes sparkled, and Connor knew that he was enjoying this.

“Harry,” Connor whinged. He knew he was whinging. He didn’t care. This was important. “Lend me your knowledge. It’s just for a *little* while.”

Harry folded his arms and raised his eyebrows. Connor couldn’t remember his brother being so expressive with his body language before. Of course, a large part of that came from the fact that, before, he’d always tucked his emotions away as soon as he felt them, not letting them influence his body language at all. Connor was grateful for the change, most of the time, but it *did* mean Harry was much more often pissed off with him.

“What happened to your resolve to study the Light pureblood rituals that you need to know?” Harry asked.

“Harry—“

“What happened to Draco and me being idiots, while you were an intelligent adult who knew how to hold his own?”

“Harry—“

“You have to learn not to depend on potions, Connor,” Harry said, chidingly. “Any wizardry worth doing doesn’t lean on them exclusively. It takes brains and cleverness, not merely mindless brewing.”

“Does Snape know you think that?” Connor said, and then wrapped his arms over his head and moaned. “I’m going to *fall flat on my face*. Apollonis and Smith will both be there, and they’ll expect me to know as much as I did the day I visited them. Take pity. Your power and your memory of the rituals I don’t take can get you through, but not me.”

“No Switching Potion,” said Harry, with a sadistic enjoyment that Connor didn’t think was very fair, and shut the door behind him.

Connor spent a few moments moaning, then stood up and went reluctantly to bathe and dress. Yes, Smith and Apollonis would probably make him suffer for his lack of studying, but it was nothing compared to what one stare from Parvati would do if he showed up for this gathering with his hair mussed and his fingers stained with ink.

“Who do you think they’ll choose for Minister?” Zacharias asked, as he helped Hermione arrange the necklace around her throat. It was a heavy piece, silver, with a clasp in the middle that Hermione thought ugly; it resembled a knot too much for her taste. It had once borne the Black family crest, but that had worn away through long centuries of polishing and touching. It sufficed for the jewelry that Hermione needed to wear in a time and place like tonight, and Harry had been happy to lend it to her.

“Who do you think they’ll choose?” Hermione countered, spelling her hair so that it would lift up and let the pearl-covered white tendrils snake through it. Zacharias looked disgruntled—according to tradition, Hermione should have braided the ribbons in by

hand—but Hermione ignored him. It wasn't as though anyone could tell, and this was the much more practical and time-saving way.

"I want to know what you think," Zacharias insisted, folding his arms. The mirror muttered about his reflection, and Hermione silently agreed: he didn't look nearly so handsome when he was pouting.

"You're trying to ride on my knowledge, Zach," Hermione murmured, knowing how much he hated the nickname. "That will never do."

His eyes sparked at her, as angry as Harry's had become in the last little while. "Fine," he said. "It'll be Cupressus Apollonis, of course. He's a Light wizard who reaches out to Dark ones, and he's been the one most involved in the infrastructure of the new Ministry, and he even took care of the traitor Juniper and insured that Harry could catch him in the act of treachery. He's been running the Ministry almost single-handedly from the very day it started. Who *else* would they choose?"

"Hm," Hermione said.

"Well?" Zacharias came around in front to stare at her. His face softened as he did, and Hermione wondered, the way she had to, whether it was for her or for the vision she presented, part Muggleborn and part pureblood lady. He reached out and let a hand linger on the ribbons in her hair in a way that could have meant either. Hermione suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. The ribbons and the gown and the silver ornaments and the rest of it were trappings to her, encumbrances she donned because they were historical and pleasing to the eyes of the purebloods and let her achieve things she couldn't have otherwise. She refused to admire them for their own sake, when their whole purpose was to make her look like something she wasn't. "What do you think, then?" Zacharias whispered, and his voice had grown softer. "Who will be Minister, in your opinion, my fine, fine lady?"

Well, they're good for one more thing, Hermione thought, as she met Zacharias's gaze. *They're good for reducing my boyfriend to a babbling fool.*

"I think Griselda Marchbanks could have it if she wanted it," she said calmly, and put out her arm to thread through Zacharias's. "Half of them will try to offer it to Harry, of course. Millicent Bulstrode has the drive and determination to do it, though she won't try now that she's pregnant. And Laura Gloryflower—well, her name is almost constantly mentioned." She paused, wondering if Zacharias would mention the one candidate Hermione considered likeliest, the one person among Harry's allies who'd been getting the most notice in the *Daily Prophet* lately and seemed well on the way to overcoming any trace of an evil reputation with sheer hard work.

Zacharias was still stuck on her choices, it appeared. "Marchbanks is too old," he said, as if Hermione should have known that. "Harry will refuse. Gloryflower's reasonable. But Bulstrode—" He made a noise like a cat being stepped on. "Hermione, Bulstrode's a *Dark witch*."

"And Harry's undeclared," Hermione shot back, as she guided Zacharias down the steps. The older partner was supposed to lead when they entered the gathering, and since the gathering was in the vast central hall of Silver-Mirror, they didn't have far to walk. "Why should the Dark wizards have to accept a Light candidate, but the Light wizards not accept a Dark one?"

"Because they should know that a Light witch or wizard won't try to hurt them!" Zacharias exclaimed. "We don't know anything like that about someone like—like *Bulstrode*. Besides, Hermione, her father served Voldemort."

"I don't think Dark witches and wizards have any reason to trust the Light more than we trust them, given what people like Dumbledore did with the best of intentions," Hermione pointed out. "So that argument's out. And yes, Millicent's father served Voldemort, and the name will work against her. But she's her own person, and this is a time for heroes, Zacharias. Do something in this period of change, and everyone will remember your name much better than they would in a time of peace, when the British wizarding world pays more attention to private than public affairs."

Zacharias opened his mouth to retort, and then shut it again. Hermione paused when they came to the doors that would open into the hall. "Thinking strained your brain?" she asked. "I suppose I'll have to find a new boyfriend, then."

"Shut up," Zacharias murmured, in that absent way he had when he was thinking. "I could make my name, too, couldn't I, if someone like Millicent *Bulstrode* could?"

"You mean that you don't already have plans in that direction?" Hermione nudged the door open with her free hand. "Slow, Zacharias, very slow."

Harry was aware of the drop in volume as he and Draco came through the doors, with Draco leading. Everyone turned to stare at them. Harry flushed—he had even less control over that now that all his emotions were out and playing in the open—but he put his chin up and walked towards the periphery of the room. He and Draco would circulate from there, greeting everyone who needed greeting, and some people who didn't but wanted to talk to them. He and Draco had had quite the argument about that, escalating to book-throwing. Draco didn't want to talk to "plebeians" and "commoners." Harry had reminded him that, thanks to the Grand Unified Theory, the Malfoys were not so separate from those commoners as they had once liked to believe. Draco had then said "Mudblood" and everything was downhill from there.

But he had not let that interfere with making sure that he and Harry were both properly garbed for the ceremony, with robes that announced them the representatives of their respective families, or that they were on time. If Draco was taking a little vicious pleasure in towing him along because he had to enter first, Harry thought, at least it wasn't visible from a distance.

Besides, they had already agreed to put minor fights aside when they were on a political stage, for the sake of a united front.

Laura Gloryflower was the first to come to meet them. Harry eyed her approvingly. She had cut her hair short so that it resembled a soldier's, and her gown was of the style that would let her reach both a knife and her wand in short order. She wanted to remind people that a war was going on outside these walls, still, and if not currently in progress, would certainly explode again on the first day of spring. Even better, a silver winged horse pranced along on the bright cloth above her head. Sometimes people looking at them looked away from her, which Harry thought meant it was working.

"Harry," she said. "I wanted to let you know that I intend to make a run for Minister."

Harry nodded. He had no idea if she would win, in part because he had no idea who would stand against her.

None of them can replace Scrimgeour.

He caught his breath around the pang of loss, and realized something abruptly, about what Laura had said and the way she was standing. He tilted his head towards Draco as he responded and added a slight emphasis to his voice. "*We* will be most interested in seeing how you do, Madam Gloryflower."

Laura twitched. Then she turned to face Draco, whom she had been looking subtly past. "Of course," she said. "I understand that you have passed through an important phase in your joining ritual, Mr. Malfoy, and therefore are much closer to being Harry's true partner. Congratulations."

Nothing about her words was openly insulting, Harry thought, watching her carefully, other than, perhaps, "true partner." And she certainly couldn't have known about the Imbolc ritual just past and how hard it had been on them—perhaps. Draco had told him that this three-year ritual was not popular. But nevertheless, there was concealed anger there, in the way that Laura held her head and aimed her voice. She didn't like being so close to a Dark wizard.

Draco, at least to Harry's eyes, hid any concealed disgust at being near a Light witch much better. He actually reached out and clasped Laura's hand, bringing it to his lips, while never removing his eyes from hers. Laura flinched and seemed to fight against drawing her hand back. Draco kissed it, and then said, "The joining ritual is a convenient marking point, but I have found myself remarkably close to Harry from the day we first met."

That wasn't very subtle, Harry thought, coughing to conceal his amusement. But perhaps it didn't need to be, if Draco had thought that Laura was denying his importance in Harry's life.

Laura slowly drew her hand back to her side; Harry saw her fingers twitching as if she wanted to wipe it off. "Yes," she said. "See that you continue to take care of our vates at least as well as you have done in the past, Mr. Malfoy." A stiff inclination of her head, and she moved away, her robes rustling.

"Are you all right?" Harry murmured to Draco.

"It was an insult, not a stab wound," Draco replied, never taking his eyes from Laura's back.

"Still. She had no right to do that."

Draco glanced at him, and smiled, sudden and unexpected as a beam of winter sunlight striking through the clouds. "She didn't," he said, and this time Harry's hand was the one caught and kissed. "But you had the right to notice, and I would have been hurt if you hadn't. Thank you."

It didn't completely smooth over their argument from before, but it was a gesture in that direction, Harry knew. He nodded to Draco, and felt his spine, which had been half-hunched like a cat's, relax. "Come on," he said, and they moved towards the next cluster of notables, who had Cupressus Apollonis in the middle of them. "Do you think she'll succeed in the run for Minister?"

Draco shook his head with some confidence. "It'll be Apollonis," he said. He paused, then added, "Although."

"Although?" Harry prompted.

"Have you noticed whom the *Prophet* is paying the most attention to, in the last few weeks?" Draco asked, lowering his voice as they passed a pair of loudly arguing Light witches. "I think it's because Skeeter enjoys debating her, more than anything, but they've also been printing more articles about the price of Wolfsbane, and that editorial sympathetic to werewolves."

Harry blinked once, then said, "Hawthorn's done something wonderful with that werewolf cure, Draco, and she thinks she's almost ready to start trying it on volunteer werewolves who want to be rid of the curse. But she served Voldemort for too long to truly make her reputation back."

"You would think that," said Draco tolerantly. "There speaks the wizard raised by Light parents with the notion that honor is important, Harry. But it need not be true. This is the game. Reputation isn't everything, and family names rise and gain prestige and lose it; that's always been true. Hawthorn's playing. Whether she'll win? I don't know. It will depend on how soon the election is held, and how much momentum she can build up before then. But if she can't convince people to make her Minister this time, I think there's a good chance she can take the next election."

Harry blinked at nothing. He had paid so little attention to something so important happening right under his nose. Of course, one could argue that he'd had enough to do, learning to live with his emotions and adjusting his behavior around Draco, and Hawthorn hadn't tried to talk to him about it, but still—

"I'm glad that you notice," he muttered.

"One of us has to be the smart one." Draco breathed the words now, since they were a few inches from Cupressus. "And the politically aware one, since you still insist on *trusting* people."

Harry flicked him a glare. "And how are your negotiations with the Americans going?" he asked.

Draco gave him a frustrated glance. Lucius had got into the negotiations somehow, and apparently there was a faction in the American Ministry who thought it a better idea to listen to the father-in-law of the Boy-Who-Lived than his partner, due at least in part to age factors.

Harry raised an eyebrow, then turned to meet Cupressus. He expected another announcement about running for Minister, but instead, Cupressus was looking past him, towards the doors of Silver-Mirror's hall. Harry turned, wondering if the decorations were out of place. He had tried to decorate two walls of the vast and bare stone room with symbols appropriate to a Dark gathering in the middle of winter and two with symbols for a Light one, and the double doors had likewise been split between the two allegiances. If someone had noticed a mistake, though, it would be Cupressus.

"We have trouble," Cupressus said, and Harry realized then that Cupressus was looking at the people coming through the doors, and not bothering to differentiate between magically-created snowflakes and magically-created shooting stars.

Lazuli Yaxley had just arrived. That in itself was not surprising; Harry had expected her at this gathering, now that the Yaxleys were moving to enter politics again. But beside her walked Jacinth, eyes wide and shivers arching through her body—Jacinth without a glamour, so that everyone could clearly see her violently nonhuman features.

And, by the way that the shadows boiled at the pair's feet, Jacinth's father had come along.

"Oh, *shit*," Harry murmured, and began to move discreetly but quickly in their direction. Draco went with him, and made sure the pace was slower than Harry would have liked. Harry restrained his irritation with the reminder that Draco was watching the larger picture, while he had a tendency to get caught up in the details. *All a part of the change.*

Sometimes, of course, he wished his life were not *quite* so filled with excitement.

Hawthorn lifted his head, then reminded herself sharply that she wasn't a werewolf any more and so couldn't actually *smell* danger. She could sense it, though, the tint to the air like winter. She shook her wand into her hand and murmured to the people who had clustered around her, including several part-owners of the *Daily Prophet*, "If you'll excuse me? It seems that Mr. Black has acquired a problem."

Reynard Rumbleworth, the one she'd been speaking with just then, nodded. "Of course, Mrs. Parkinson," he said, and let her pass. Hawthorn could feel his admiring eyes on her as she glided away, and frowned. She *hated* walking away from politics. The conversations that might go on in her absence, the dances and the threats and the glimpses of emotions in eyes and lips, pulled at her like treacle, and she usually rejoined the game as soon as she could.

When she came into the center of the room and saw the shadows boiling around Lazuli Yaxley's feet, she changed her mind about returning to the conversation any time soon.

She was in the best position to help Harry with this, she reasoned, thoughts flying as swiftly as her feet. She had until recently *been* a creature feared and hated by other wizards, though not nearly as feared and hated as Jacinth's father. And she had gained enough reputation to help smooth over the ripples from the stone that had just fallen into their calm little pond.

There was the question, of course, if she wanted to sacrifice that reputation because Yaxley was impatient, and she had to admit she didn't. But there was the fact that taking a risk like this might win her much.

Dragonsbane's voice echoed in her head, teasing her one Halloween when Hawthorn had described the hundreds of different ambitions she had, and how she would never live long enough to achieve them all. *Once a Slytherin, always a conniver.*

Hawthorn could not help that, though—either the ambition or the soft jolt that traveled through her when she thought of her husband. She was alive, and free of service to a madman, and as long as those two things were true, she would think and plan and dream.

She halted in front of the Yaxley woman and bowed her head. The child gave her one wide, golden-eyed glance, and flicked out a forked tongue to taste the air. Hawthorn nodded to her. Of course, her scent had changed since the last time she had seen Jacinth, and the girl would notice.

Then she faced Lazuli. Harry was already there, in front of her, but the darkness on his face said that whatever question he'd just asked and heard answered had not been *well* answered. His magic sparked around his shoulders; Hawthorn could see wings if she squinted. Those were usually a sign of dangerous anger in the days since Harry had done what he called falling down the mountain.

Yes, I am the best one to smooth this over.

"Greetings, Madam Yaxley," she said, and drew those unnerving blue eyes to her own. "I presume that you are here to test the politeness that your daughter and mate receive in a public gathering?"

"The *vates* has said, and I believe him, that he intends to make a world where half-human wizards and witches are welcome," said Lazuli, folding her arms so that Hawthorn could see the chewed-off chunks of flesh along them. "And so, too, are those magical creatures who choose to grace us with their presence." Her gaze was heavy, as if inviting Hawthorn to compare the cold stares and nervous sidling that went on around them now to the way people had looked at her when they'd known her for a werewolf.

That was the problem, of course, Hawthorn thought clinically. She *did* remember the reaction she'd received, and how much it bothered her. She still felt thankful each time a full moon rode the sky and she didn't transform. But she'd never had a true pack, only the torn remnants of the one that Fenrir Greyback's victims had formed, and so she'd never felt the impatient daring to walk into public, the way Loki had, and force Harry's hand. Lazuli had followed her impulses, and not thought about the way it might rebound on her—or Harry, to be more precise, since Harry would, of course, be bound to protect her and her daughter.

The little girl, Jacinth, hissed something in Parseltongue to Harry. Harry responded instantly, his eyes becoming soft. Jacinth nodded, then reached up and tugged on her mother's sleeve. Lazuli bent at once, though she never took her eyes from Hawthorn's as she listened to the difficult English words forced around Jacinth's tongue and teeth. Hawthorn listened, but her preternatural hearing had gone, and she couldn't catch more than one word in three. It sounded as though Jacinth were urging her mother to leave, however.

Lazuli straightened with a slight shake of her head. "It seems that the rumors of welcome were greatly exaggerated," she said. "Would you care to make a comment on that, *vates*?" She was looking straight at Harry.

Hawthorn got there before Harry could. Whatever he said now would be used against him, misinterpreted. Yes, she might sacrifice the reputation she'd built up, but it would *still* be better than Harry doing something to stain his own.

"Harry has always insured that those magical creatures who promised not to hurt others in the exercise of their own free will were welcome," she said. "And he needed warning of their coming. Am I wrong, Madam Yaxley, in thinking that neither a peace agreement nor warning were given beforehand?"

Lazuli's eyes clouded slightly. She would probably take this as an insult to her honor, Hawthorn knew, and that inference would strike her deep. "I did not think them needed," Lazuli responded, "if the world were truly as safe for my child and mate as it should be."

The shadows at her feet churned, and Hawthorn caught a glimpse of a rising chest and a pair of forelegs that ended in claws sharp enough to scoop out a person's insides. For a moment, just a moment, she was a child again, huddling beneath the blankets while her house elf nanny whispered horrid tales of the Viper Wars.

The house elf was long freed, Hawthorn reminded herself, and she was long since an adult. She locked her eyes on Lazuli's face. "Without them, we do not know that you came here in good faith," she said. "You could, perhaps, set your mate on us, and have him feed."

And she *had* to take the risk, because, if she did not die, this would make her name for numerous traits the Light wizards admired, such as courage and a sense of duty. She locked her eyes on the swirling shadows and took a step forward. "How do I know," she asked, "that those teeth will not tear my flesh?"

She could feel Harry's tension from here. That didn't matter. He was keeping back, letting her handle this. She looked at Lazuli, not the shadows, and ignored even the sensation of them stretching towards her. She tested, instead, the Yaxley woman's nerve. The creatures that had once hunted wizards were beyond Hawthorn's comprehension. A Dark witch who had decided to take a risk was not.

The moment pulled again like treacle, except that the drops that fell from this were made of anticipation. Hawthorn breathed in and out, eyes never leaving Lazuli's wide ones.

And then Lazuli glanced aside, and the moment broke, and the game was over.

Hawthorn had won.

It was time to reconcile, of course, because humiliating the woman wasn't going to do any good. "In one way, I am glad that you did seek to test our boundaries of acceptance," she said, making her voice warm and calm and friendly. "After all, if you had not, we would not have known that this particular species of magical creature could stand in the same room as mortal wizards and witches and not try to destroy them."

The shadows stirred again, but Hawthorn was reasonably confident they would not strike. No one had ever accused the creatures behind the Viper Wars of being mindless. The creature had to realize that, even if it managed to kill Hawthorn and several others, there would be people trying to strike at its—his—mate and daughter. It might be good at killing others, but Hawthorn didn't know how good it would be at protecting Lazuli and Jacinth.

"This is an excellent sign for the future," Hawthorn prattled on, saying what needed to be said, and building up her own reputation in the meantime. "We know that we can share common space with your mate now, Madam Yaxley, as we have learned we can share it with centaurs and werewolves." She gave Lazuli a piercing smile, then turned to the people watching them breathlessly. "I assume that we have gathered here to discuss the Ministry and the candidates for Minister?" she asked, and received several hesitant nods. "Then why aren't we doing it?"

That won her laughter, and the crowd began to break up and move towards the table in the center of the room, where the truly official part of the gathering would be held.

Glancing over her shoulder, Hawthorn saw Harry stepping in to talk to Lazuli and Jacinth, both. He gave the shadows on the floor a respectful glance, but did not seem afraid of them. Hawthorn relaxed, glad that the negotiations over the viper's continued presence in the room would fall to Harry and not her.

A hand caught her arm, and Hawthorn barely stifled the instincts that told her to swing around and use her wand—or her teeth—to take it off at the wrist. Instead, she turned with a patient smile, and Reynard Rumpelworth beamed at her. "That was more than amazing, Madam Parkinson," he said. Hawthorn silently noted the change in title; she had been simply "Mrs. Parkinson" before.

“I hope that you will accept my escort to the table?” He offered her his arm.

Hawthorn placed her hand on his arm in the proper position, and let herself be guided. The admiration from dozens of pairs of eyes washed over her like sunlight.

She was not sure whether or not she would announce her candidacy for Minister yet. For one thing, she was not sure that she wanted to run the new Ministry. It would depend on what other decisions they made today.

But the admiration was its own reward, a stepping stone towards many other high positions even if she did not choose the highest. It soothed an itch inside her that, for an ambitious Slytherin, could be scratched no other way.

Draco was not sure that Harry would be forceful enough. If he wasn't, Draco was prepared to offer the needed threats. Lazuli Yaxley had endangered their political reputations along with lives. She did not deserve anything but a thorough scolding.

Luckily, that was what Harry gave her, and Draco had to admire the way he did it.

“You made me no promises of good faith,” Harry told her, utterly ignoring the shadows that danced at his feet. “You did not tell me that you planned to bring Jacinth unglamoured, and that put *her* in danger, as well as the people around you. What would have happened if someone had cast a spell in his panic before I could intervene? She might well have *died*.”

“I knew you would protect us,” Lazuli murmured, but her voice was shaken. Draco knew why. The only thing that could truly crack that flawless façade, it seemed, was danger to her daughter.

“You cannot play me against other people who depend on me.” Harry folded his arms, and his voice had turned into stone. “You cannot force me to choose between one faction and another, your safety over theirs, when you were the one who would have begun the war and given the provocation. I am disappointed in you, Lazuli.” His voice shifted a bit. “Now. Did you come to make a contribution to this discussion about the best way the Ministry should be run, or did you come solely to put me and Jacinth in untenable positions?”

“I did not think of it that way,” Lazuli said.

“I know you did not.” Draco *did* approve of that; now that Harry was sure his authority was understood, he could soften his voice and talk to Lazuli as he would to a friend he'd forgiven. His mother had more than once done that with Lucius. Draco took a deep breath, trying to absorb the pride of that memory and forget the sadness, and listened to Harry, because what he said next would be important. “But did you come here for more than that purpose?”

“No, in truth,” said Lazuli, and then seemed to recover. “But I would like to know where the Ministry stands on the treatment of half-human wizards and witches as soon as possible.” Her hand fell on Jacinth's shoulder. The little girl was rigid with tension, Draco saw, thought she relaxed a bit when her mother stroked her hair.

“Hear it from my mouth,” said Harry. “They shall have the same rights as any other wizards and witches. If their changes are such as may cause harm to others, in the way that the werewolf transformation is, they will be required to make modifications to their behavior to protect others. The Ministry will help with those modifications if necessary, as we help with the Wolfsbane Potion.”

“You do not know if the others will decide that way,” Lazuli said, hooking her chin towards the gathering of politicians.

“I will *make* them do that.”

Draco bit his lip to smother a victorious grin. Yes, *finally*. There was power in the way Harry stood, and in the way he lifted his head so that he was glaring straight back at Lazuli, daring her to challenge or doubt his word. Harry could ask for what he wanted, and he was going to enforce his will. He was doing it in the name of others rather than for himself, but still. Draco considered this a good start for the showing of a more Slytherin side of Harry's politics.

Lazuli studied him in silence, then abruptly nodded and turned for the doors. The shadows accompanied her, though Jacinth lingered long enough to hiss something at Harry. Harry hissed back, a lengthy, gentle exhalation, and followed Draco towards the table when Jacinth nodded and turned away.

“What did you say to her?” Draco asked.

“She asked if I was angry at her for what her mother had done,” Harry said. “I said I wasn’t, but I did warn her that, though things are changing, she should learn how to do the glamour on her own if something like this happens again.”

Draco nodded. “I didn’t think that Lazuli Yaxley would take such a foolish risk with her daughter,” he murmured.

“She thought there was little to no risk, with her—mate—“ Draco could tell Harry didn’t like the word, but, just as with everyone else, he didn’t seem to think there was a better way to refer to the shadow-creature “—here, and with me. And she’s right that I wouldn’t have let anyone *hurt* Jacinth deliberately, or get away with hurting her. But there was a chance, however small.” Harry smiled slightly. “She was more in the mood to listen to someone else after Hawthorn talked sense into her, of course. Hawthorn did wonderfully well. Remind me to thank her later.”

“Is Hawthorn someone you want as Minister?” Draco murmured, his mind already working rapidly.

“Does she plan to run?” Harry countered.

“Support her, and she could,” Draco pointed out. He was growing more and more pleased with the idea the more he examined it. Yes, Hawthorn had begun to build herself a reputation, and the fascination with the first woman to cure herself of lycanthropy would win her more of one. But there was the name and the record of service to Voldemort, however unwilling. Harry’s support would negate that, and Draco was confident Hawthorn was loyal to Harry. Having someone like that in the position of Minister of Magic was the next best thing to Harry being Minister himself, which Draco knew he wouldn’t consider.

For a moment, he saw the weary woman with the tight mouth and the drawn wand teaching him about blood curses. Then he shook his head, and reminded himself what reality they stood in. The Imbolc ritual was past, and none of the five that remained—Walpurgis, Lammas, Halloween, Imbolc, and the last Walpurgis—were nearly as unpleasant.

“I’ll ask her what she wants, first.”

Draco suppressed the urge to shake Harry. Him and his support of free will! Hawthorn would make the best choice for Harry’s own political ends, and that was what he should be thinking of, instead of all this endless free will for wizarding Britain. Wizarding Britain was made up of stupid people who didn’t know what they wanted, or at least didn’t know until someone told them. Draco would rather that Harry lead from the front than hang back.

But he reminded himself that Harry wasn’t perfect and never would be, and just sighed. “If she says yes?”

“I’ll consider it.” Harry’s voice was troubled. He had meant to keep his voice out of the contest at all costs, Draco knew, and not even say whom he supported or was going to vote for—assuming they emerged from this night with a workable compromise at all.

But at least he was considering it. Draco snorted. *I have that much influence with him. I’ll just have to work to show him that I’m right, and that it really is the best solution.*

They reached the table, and took the empty seats between Cupressus Apollonis and Miriam Smith. Draco nodded to Hawthorn, who sat a few chairs down, and she nodded back. Murmurs rang back and forth at once, of course. People would see the nods, Draco knew, and draw all the right conclusions—and some wrong ones. They might begin to think the stunt with Lazuli was planned, but even if they did, there was no denying Hawthorn’s courage in facing the shadow-beast. Legend said those creatures couldn’t be reasoned with, and any plan involving one of them would still have carried an element of risk.

Draco faced Apollonis as he began to speak. He had to admit he didn’t like the old Light wizard much. Draco always began his political maneuverings with observation; that was part of what both Lucius and Narcissa had taught him, and it usually afforded him valuable insights. His own adaptation of the process was to look for weaknesses. And Apollonis had far too few. He didn’t seem to have dirty secrets, because he was as brutally honest as possible; even his feud with his daughter was public knowledge. He was too upright and too inflexible to be bribed. He didn’t allow people close to him who could be turned. In fact, Draco thought that he had only house elves working in his household, not human servants.

House elves. Could that be a sticking point? If he won’t give them up, then he and Harry will have words to exchange with each other sooner rather than later.

For now, Draco hushed his own speculations to pay attention to Apollonis’s words.

“We must, of course,” the pompous bastard was saying, “decide whether we shall model the new Ministry on the old, or design a new system from the ground up. The latter is the harder choice, but it would prevent corruption from blossoming as it did under

the old regime.”

No, it won't, you windbag, Draco thought. *I'm sure the wizards who founded the Ministry thought the same, but it crept in anyway, and once people got used to the new requirements, it would happen here.*

“We need some general decisions made now, though we can save finer details for later,” said Harry firmly, and all eyes went at once to him. “First is to determine the candidates for Minister of Magic. Second is to pledge the Ministry’s support for magical creatures, half-human wizards, Muggleborns, and others who historically had a hard time with the old Ministry. Third is to make sure that a certain number of jobs for members of that group are secured at the new Ministry.”

“Such decisions require some assumptions on the finer details, *vates*,” Laura Gloryflower pointed out from the other end of the table. Draco regarded her with disdain. She had shown such subtle condescension towards him that he would have had a hard time pointing it out as prejudice, but it was there nonetheless. Every movement and avoidance of eye contact screamed that she didn’t think a Malfoy had a right to sit in their high councils, or that Draco himself didn’t have a right to his place at Harry’s side.

Of course, one thing was different about this from all the prejudiced Light wizards and witches Draco had dealt with before: this time, Harry had noticed. He fought to keep himself from grinning just then. No one would understand.

“Not all of them,” Harry said calmly. “I assume you are referring to such details as the process of choice for Minister, Madam Gloryflower?” He waited until she nodded, then said, “But we have already named the building the Ministry and spoken of the future Minister of Magic. Announcing the candidacy is not the same thing as deciding that we will or will not use the voting owls your family designed centuries ago. Some decisions are made for us. Others we can wait on.”

Draco was smug to see that most of the Light wizards—except Cupressus Apollonis—had to pause to consider what he meant by that—while the Dark wizards and witches gathered around the table understood at once.

“You’re envisioning a Ministry consistent in the details with the old one, then, Mr. Black?” Elizabeth Nonpareil asked, leaning forward.

Draco hid the roll of his eyes, because he knew some people were watching him. *Well, most of them understood at once.*

“Of course not, Mrs. Nonpareil,” said Harry, and his voice had gone dry. “Their treatment of magical creatures and Muggleborns was far more than a detail.”

“But you said—“

“I think we can use the old names and not imply the old things,” said Harry, giving her the kind of personal, flattering smile that Draco knew was best to deal with attention-hounds like her, but which made him feel a bit jealous nonetheless. “That was all I was suggesting, Mrs. Nonpareil.”

Harry smelled of roses, Draco noted. The magic around him made the Dark witch a bit giddy, and she leaned back in her chair with a nod and a smile, letting the larger sense of Harry’s words fly completely over her head.

Belinda Morningmaid had a snotty voice, and a drawl that sounded to Draco like a poor imitation of his father’s. “And the inclusion of magical creatures in the Ministry is non-negotiable, Mr. Black?”

“Non-negotiable,” said Harry, and for a moment, his shoulders sparked.

“They may plan sabotage,” Morningmaid pressed. “We know that Veritaserum doesn’t work on most of them. What if they enter the Ministry and suborn its people and principles to their own ends, instead of working for the good of humans and magical creatures alike?”

Harry turned, quite unexpectedly, to Draco. “Draco,” he said.

Draco sat up and nodded to show he was listening, while his heart sped. He thought it was a combination of the surprise and the thrill that Harry was actually talking to him, asking his opinion, in a political discussion with other people, and told himself to calm down if so. Of *course* Harry would ask his opinion. They were partners, and Draco was often better-informed than Harry himself.

“That spell you invented that lets others enter into Pensieves and experience the mindset of the memories, as well as the memories themselves,” Harry said casually. “Would it work on a magical creature?”

Draco allowed himself one blink, and then no more. The answer flowed out of him as naturally as breathing, because it had to. “No reason it should not.”

Harry smiled, and faced Morningmaid again, while his hand crept under the table to press Draco’s. “There you have the answer, Mrs. Morningmaid. If Veritaserum will not work, we can use the spell Draco invented. It would let anyone who had questions see the purity—or not—of the magical creature’s intentions for himself.” He paused thoughtfully. “Actually, I rather like the implications of your suggestion. Yes, indeed, we should not let corruption enter the Ministry. I think we’ll require a test of *everyone* who applies for a job here, including both Pensieve memories and Veritaserum where applicable.”

Morningmaid made a choking sound. Draco ignored her. He could feel other people giving him admiring sidelong glances. Inventing a spell was no easy affair. Draco decided he would arrange to leak the information that he’d actually developed that spell when he was fifteen. That ought to gain him even more respect.

“The Ministry has a procedure in place for hiring both magical creatures and humans, then,” Harry went on, sounding inordinately pleased with himself. “So, now. The candidates for the office of Minister. Who will they be?”

Apollonis, of course, rose to his feet. Draco sat back and looked around the table, barely containing a snort when Gloryflower stood. There had to be Dark candidates—and ones *other* than Elizabeth Nonpareil, he thought, who’d stood up just then. She could cause a problem with her Galleons, but there was no way she would win a contest like this. Nor did she deserve to.

Then Hawthorn stood.

Draco smiled. He didn’t care who saw. Perhaps Harry would have to be seen as remaining neutral in this election, but there was no rule that said his partner had to be.

And then a movement further down the table caught his eye, and he leaned that way just as Lucius flicked a piece of nonexistent dust off his robes and nodded to the incredulous stares.

“I find myself qualified,” he said, answering the silent questions, “and surely, if one candidate feels herself equal to the pressure of a tainted name, a Malfoy may feel the same.”

Draco restrained a glare. But he did present a smooth, neutral mask to the people who looked to him for his reaction. Let no one think the son supported the father just because they had the same name.

In fact, he thought, locking his gaze on his father, quite the opposite. Let the games begin, then, Lucius, since you don’t have the sense to stay out of them.

Harry opened the door of the Black library, and paused with a lift of his eyebrow. He’d expected to be alone when he came here to do his research on summoning spells, save perhaps for Thomas, but Connor was there, half-asleep over a large book.

“Connor?” he asked.

His brother jumped and turned to face him. His face fell when he saw who it was. “Harry,” he moaned. “The gathering was a *disaster*.”

Harry felt a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He tried not to let it out. “Really?”

“Both Apollonis and Smith asked me all these *questions* I couldn’t answer, and talked about what I had to know to be a proper Light heir until my ear wanted to fall off, and Smith talked about her cousin’s daughter and how advantageous a joining of the Potter and Smith lines could be.” Connor made a disgusted sound. “I couldn’t even tell her that Parvati and I are dating. I tried, but she just went on talking as if I made no sense. I think she thought I forfeited her respect because I didn’t know the rituals she thought I did.” He sat up straighter and pouted at Harry. “All of which could have been avoided if you let me have the Switching Potion.”

Harry’s amusement vanished so fast that it surprised even him, and he let wings snap into being above his shoulders. They weren’t quite the spiked monstrosities they’d been the night he flew off the Astronomy Tower, but Connor blinked and fell silent anyway.

“I’m not going to be your scapegoat or your source,” Harry growled at him. The lingering memories of the Imbolc ritual made this a particularly sore point with him. He *was* worth more than what he could be to his brother. He had to be. Most of the time, Connor remembered that, but not always. “You should have bloody learned the rituals on your own, Connor. You’ve had years, and I know you aren’t stupid. And you’ve even had some weeks in between the last time you met Cupressus and Miriam.”

Connor flushed. “Not all of us are as smart as you are, Harry.”

“But you could have tried, and you didn’t want to.” Harry shook his head at him. He knew Connor was probably half-asleep, and that accounted for his unusual childishness, but, just once, the reason wasn’t enough to become an excuse. “You *should* try, Connor. Maybe Apollonis and Smith aren’t right about everything you need to know—you might not move in their circles, after all—but you’ll need to know more than you do now, and the war won’t last forever. What will you do after it?”

Connor glared at him. “I don’t know yet. Maybe play Quidditch. I don’t have to decide everything just yet. Not everyone jumps onto the path of their life at thirteen, Harry.”

“No, but you need to think about it,” Harry replied insistently.

Connor stuck out his tongue. Knowing the conversation would go nowhere up from there, Harry rolled his eyes and turned to depart.

“It’s not always an unmixed blessing, this change of yours to let the emotions out,” Connor muttered at his back.

Harry bared his teeth, but managed to restrain himself to a clipped, “Nothing is,” and a slam of the library door hard enough to hurt his wrist.

He stood where he was for a moment, trembling, then started up the stairs to Draco. So he and his brother were going to have arguments like this. It was normal, natural, inevitable. If they’d been normal siblings, they would probably have had far more epic battles by this point in their lives.

But it sent a worm of hurt into Harry’s gut anyway.

Not enough to make go back and apologize, though, because I did nothing wrong. I didn’t.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy: Hogwarts

Harry had dreamed of the sea.

He was certain it was the North Sea off the beach in Northumberland, though he did not know why he thought that when he woke up. After all, he had seen the ocean in darkness, gray waves heaving under rain. He had held up a hand, and the waves rose and danced. He lowered it, and they retreated as if it were ebb tide, hissing and shushing so gently across the sand that Harry had to concentrate to make the sounds out.

When he looked up, glassy black walls surrounded him and the expanse of water. He knew that just beyond the glass, grief waited for him. Patient as a revenant tracking its prey, it hummed to itself. It would not break the walls to get at him, Harry knew. Sooner or later, his resolve to live in the world would drive him forth from this place, and then it could pounce and rend.

He wrapped his arms around himself and shivered, and then woke, shivering. He reached up to touch his face, and paused. Wetness lay all around his mouth, as though he had stood in front of the sea and come away stained with the foam. He licked his lips and tasted salt.

“Harry?”

His movement, light as it had been, had awakened Draco. Harry reached up and gently stroked Draco’s hair with one hand, while he used the other to feel at his eyes. The wetness could have come from tears, after all, making their way down and clustering around his lips.

Nothing there, though. Harry shivered again.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, when Draco spoke his name a second time. “I had a bad dream, and now that I’m awake, it feels as

though the dream was actually *real*.” He uttered a laugh that went too high, so he cut it off, and touched his lips again. “Perhaps it was simply my magic imitating what it thought should be there.”

“What was the dream about?” Draco pushed himself up on one elbow in their blanket-nest and yawned. His hair hung so wildly over his face that Harry found it hard to make out his eyes.

Harry hesitated, then shook his head. He *wanted* to share it, and besides, the idea that Draco would make fun of him was silly.

“Not a Voldemort dream,” he said. “I was standing by the sea, and I seemed to control it. There was a storm, which made it impossible for me to see where I was, but I think—the beach in the north, the one where Voldemort tried to command the sirens to attack that autumn. The one where the unicorns swam with me?” he clarified, when he saw Draco’s brow wrinkle as he struggled to recall that memory.

Draco nodded at once, but his eyes were concerned. “And then what happened?”

“I had the feeling that something immense and sorrowful had happened, but I wouldn’t know about it until I chose to turn away from the ocean,” Harry breathed. He brushed a hand across his face again and winced. No, the salt was still there, and what felt like an actual flake of brine clung to his cheek. “And then I woke up with foam on my lips, as though the sea were real.”

“Well, I’m no expert at dreams,” Draco said, and then crowded close, urging Harry onto his back. “It doesn’t *sound* like something Voldemort would send to you, but you can’t be sure. Talk to Snape in the morning, and see what he says about it. He’s spent enough time over the past few days brooding. I’m sure he needs a challenge.” He ducked his head and rubbed his cheek against Harry’s. “There *is* something I’m an expert in, though, and I want to do it now.” His hand slid between Harry’s legs.

Harry didn’t bother asking if he were sure. He needed this too much. He closed his eyes, and let Draco kiss him, and let the taste of that replace the salt, just as Draco’s husky murmurs in his ears replaced the sound of the waves rising and falling.

“There is a purpose to choosing this meeting site, I assume?” Jing-Xi let none of her own surprise show. It would not be productive. She stood calmly in front of the window that conducted the vision of her to the other Lord and Ladies, and let her memories of the British wizarding school happen in a part of her mind that would not require undue reflection on her face.

“Of course there is,” said Coatlicue, the serpents of her skirt climbing around her, draping their necks about hers and swaying back and forth with a rapidity that reminded Jing-Xi of plains grass swaying in the wind. The snake reflected her friend’s moods, Jing-Xi knew, and the Light Lady of Mexico was nervous. “It will remind us all of the power of Lord Riddle’s evil, as well as the lengths he is willing to go to to kill Lord Black. And it will remind us of Kanerva’s death, and that more than one Lord-slayer is currently walking the world.”

Jing-Xi simply raised an eyebrow, and turned to look at the others the windows gave her access to. Pamela Seaborn gave her a look that said she didn’t approve of choosing Hogwarts as the site of their meeting with Harry, either. Alexandre’s expression was distant, as always, listening to music that Jing-Xi couldn’t hear. She refused to meet Elena’s eyes, looking at the shape of her nose instead. The Dark Lady of Peru was missing something essential to make her human, and always had been.

“The meeting site is chosen,” Elena said, voice falling oddly silent, as though it should echo and would not. “And the representatives are chosen. These two Light Ladies, as representatives of one side of the allegiance. Alexandre and I, as representatives of the Dark. And yourself, Jing-Xi. You will see your protégé again. You will simply not be allowed to do it alone.”

Jing-Xi sighed. She should at least warn them of what Harry’s reaction might be when he heard they wanted to meet at a place of Voldemort’s victory, and the place where so many innocents had died. “He will not like this. He might feel that we have come there not to make peace or offer acceptable terms, but simply to spite him.”

“He would be wrong.” Elena folded her arms. Jing-Xi knew those dark eyes had never blinked, though she did not look up to confront them. “Unless you are saying that you agree with him, Jing-Xi?”

It was a difficult dance, this one between the Pact and an emergent power they did not want to accept as one of their own. But Jing-Xi had done it before, when she urged the others to accept Kanerva on her terms rather than trying to restrict her with too many laws she would simply be unable to understand. She had thought the young Dark Lady well worth it, and she thought the same thing about Harry. She was one of the most powerful witches in the world, too, she reminded herself. Just because she usually preferred diplomacy and gentleness, as many Light-sworn did, did not mean she was lesser than they were.

In particular, she was stronger than Elena, and that could matter much, in a private disagreement.

“I am saying this as someone who helped to rescue the children of Hogwarts,” said Jing-Xi softly, “who felt a friend die there, who spent much time there at the Pact’s behest while I tried to help Harry, and as someone who was summoned away before I could find out if they needed me in the wake of the school’s fall. I think this move undiplomatic, Elena, and designed more to put Harry in a place that he does not seem to need than to make the Pact any more secure. Harry has faced enemies all his life who thought he should take a place of respect far below what his power and accomplishments demand. Do you think he will take this well? Tell me.”

“Ah, the honesty of the Light.”

What would have been sarcasm from Alexandre simply fell flat from Elena. Jing-Xi glanced aside. She knew the meeting would happen anyway—the Pact had already agreed on it, and already agreed on what they would have to tell Harry—but she couldn’t help hoping that the rumors filtering out of Britain with the refugees were true, that Harry had changed enough to confound the most powerful wizards and witches in the world.

He could not battle them, certainly. But they will arrive thinking he will submit, and I hope he will not.

Should she voice such thoughts aloud, of course, someone would accuse her of desiring war. But there was a thick line between war and hoping to see her colleagues learn respect of a boy they disliked mostly because of things he had done to other people, and never directly to them.

He is in the world. They must live with it, as they lived with Kanerva’s emergence and Monika’s. Fussing about it is worrying about the grass crushed by the ki-lin’s hooves.

Snape slowly turned Harry’s head from side to side, examining his temples and massaging them gently. He had looked into his son’s mind with Legilimency, and seen the pools all clustered faithfully around the scar, so that Voldemort could not possibly influence his mind. Now he looked for some sign that Harry had taken a curse which induced grief-dreams. Snape would not put it past the Potter brat to use a spell like that, since he was sulking about being ignored by Harry. And he studied so little that he might think a spell like that a harmless bit of fun.

There was no telltale blue circle, though, no matter how Snape probed, and Harry at last began to wriggle beneath his hands. Snape sat back and looked directly into Harry’s eyes. “I fear this may be a dream of the future, Harry,” he said calmly, “and nothing more or less important.”

Harry frowned. “I thought I didn’t have prophetic dreams,” he said, “only dreams that leaked through my scar connection with Voldemort.”

Snape shrugged. “I do not know that we ever had the opportunity to measure such a thing,” he said. “Perhaps you have a gift for prophetic dreaming that the scar connection inspired, or covered before now. Or perhaps some of the dreams you saw as originating with Voldemort came from yourself.” That made sense, the more he thought about it. While Voldemort would have wanted to send visions to torment Harry, some of the information Harry had picked up from his dreams—such as the mere fact of Voldemort’s existence in the back of Quirrell’s head—was not a forewarning Voldemort would have wanted his enemies to get his hands on. Snape usually sneered at Divination, but there were real Seers in the world. There might be dreamers. He suspected years of experimentation would be necessary before they could tell for sure.

“And I dream about Voldemort because he’s the most important obstacle in my life,” Harry said slowly.

Snape nodded. “Visions are usually less reliable than spoken prophecy,” he cautioned, just so Harry wouldn’t think he had the gift to predict his enemy’s movements now. Yes, it was unlikely, but Harry had taken similarly unlikely risks in the name of the war. “This vision may not mean the sea, but something like it, or an important place in your life, or a foretaste of grief. Water is sometimes associated with such.”

“Who took Divination here?” Harry smiled. “Thank you, Father. At least I know it’s not from *him*.” He paused a moment, then added, “And what about you?”

Snape frowned and lightly touched the Dark Mark on his arm. “It has not hurt since the school came down.”

“I meant,” said Harry, leaning forward slightly from the chair he sat in, “what are you dreaming?”

Snape leaned back in his own chair, and debated whether he should answer. It was very easy to make vows to change one’s life; he had done it many, many times. And then the vows fell to the ground and shattered, or otherwise went unanswered. Only the vows of his Death Eater initiation, the turning to Dumbledore, and the decision to help Harry had become cornerstones of his life. It was easy, therefore, to say or to think that he would try to live after Regulus’s death and stop blaming himself, but far from easy to do. Why not let it sink into darkness? It was not as though anyone would ever know it but himself. He could bear it. The other important person involved in it was dead.

“I want to know,” Harry insisted.

Snape’s eyes narrowed. There was that unusual tone in his son’s voice again which came from letting the Occlumency pools go. Harry not only wanted to know because he was genuinely interested, but because he thought he had some right to intrude on Snape’s private emotions.

Snape could envision a life where Harry would bully and push and shove him into keeping his vow to live better after Regulus’s death and not take so much for granted. The vision was not an attractive one. Snape did not need a minder. He was the father, not the son. He therefore narrowed his eyes, and waited for Harry to recognize that this was an exercise of his free will and he should back off.

Harry folded his arms. “You can’t pretend that this doesn’t matter to you,” he said flatly. “They’re bad dreams, aren’t they.”

“They are *stupid* dreams,” Snape corrected, stung. *As if I were a child, to be undone by a nightmare.* “Dreams of—of what would have happened if Regulus had not died in the garden.” There. That much, he could admit to his son. He would not admit the dreams that had smiles in them. Harry could interfere all he liked. Such details would remain behind Snape’s teeth.

Harry’s posture altered, and now he looked like the *vates* he had been for so long. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Yes. Do not ask me about my dreams again.

But that was an outright violation of his vow, not just an omission in keeping it. Snape clenched his teeth. He hated being trapped in corners like this, and that he knew Harry wanted to help him, rather than help to use him, like Dumbledore, or keep him for a tool, like Voldemort, just made this worse.

“Do not often ask me about them,” Snape said at last, and felt his cheeks flush again at Harry’s look of understanding. *I am not undone by them. What I say in my sleep does not count.* “When I—wish to discuss them, or when I have great difficulty, I will speak with you. Otherwise, do me the courtesy of not probing.”

Harry grinned, and leaned forward to hug him. “That was all I wanted, really,” he muttered into Snape’s shoulder, while Snape just sat there stiffly, shocked beyond measure. “A promise that you’d speak if you needed to. You tend to keep your problems to yourself far too often, you know.”

“So speaks an expert.”

Harry winced a bit, but managed to chuckle as he pulled away. “Like father, like son?” he suggested lightly.

Snape restrained himself from shaking his head, because he knew Harry would misinterpret the gesture. It was not that he minded Harry likening Snape and himself; far better that than Harry suddenly seeing an unexpected likeness to James in himself. But he had suddenly tumbled into a world where Harry wasn’t fighting this aspect of family between himself and Snape, and it was disconcerting.

“Yes, indeed,” Snape said coolly, and then looked hard at Harry. “Though *my* son would also, ideally, spend a bit more time in brewing potions that did not work solely to benefit his brother.”

Harry flushed. “It was just the once,” he said, looking at the wall. “I did it to help Connor, but he’s proven that he doesn’t deserve a second dose, when he just assumed that I would do it for him for the gathering yesterday, and didn’t try to learn the Light pureblood rituals on his own.”

Snape snorted, glad to be back in the role he understood, as the one who could chastise and guide Harry when he wouldn’t accept the same from anyone else. “See that you do not forget your hand,” he said. “Brewing skill will serve you every bit as well as politics when the world comes back together.”

“Yes, Father,” said Harry, with a roll of his eyes that made Snape happy for some inexplicable reason. “In the meantime, I’m going to study summoning spells. If I’m ever to have any hope of bringing Evan Rosier to me, that is the way, since I wouldn’t write to him.” Harry snorted. “As if his letters are any guarantee of good will in any case.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. “If I find that you have gone to meet him on your own, I will—“

Harry held up a hand. “You won’t have to do anything. I don’t plan on ever facing an enemy alone again. At least Draco will be with me, and you, too, if I can manage it.”

“You know that someone else will have to die to destroy the Hufflepuff cup,” Snape reminded him, since it seemed Harry had forgotten that. “Have you considered who will do it?”

Harry’s eyes were clear and bleak as a stretch of tundra. “Whoever is willing to die when we have the cup,” he said quietly. “At this point, I can’t predict who that will be. And I know better than to think I can do it,” he added, then slipped out of the room before Snape could question him further.

Snape leaned back against the wall and scowled. He did not like to think of his son summoning Evan Rosier in any way, but it was as inevitable as someone needing to die to destroy the Cup. They could not break the Unassailable Curse if they did not have the Horcrux.

At least he had Harry’s reassurance that he would not go hunting Rosier alone.

Snape wondered what was more surprising: the fact that Harry had given him that reassurance unprompted, or the fact that he trusted Harry to keep *this* promise, when he would have been planning to keep a silent watch on him before.

Harry paused when an owl fluttered through the windows. He’d been on his way to the library to study summoning spells, but the universe seemed in a conspiracy to ever keep him from finding books, he thought. There was Connor last night, and now this envelope, with a heavy official seal that Harry didn’t recognize: the sun within the arms of the crescent moon, with the world beneath it.

Of course, he could guess, and when he tore open the envelope and read the bland words inside, his guess had been correct.

February 19th, 1998

Dear Mr. Black:

Though you may not realize it, there are still concerns among us about what you intend to do after the war with Lord Riddle and how much you will expose the magical world of Britain to Muggles. Because these are matters that properly affect the international community and not the British Isles alone, we wish to meet with you and discuss this. The meeting will happen on the twenty-first of February, at noon, near the ruins of Hogwarts school. The Pact will send your friend Jing-Xi, the Light Lady of China, as well as two more representatives of each allegiance, to insure that every side of the matter has a voice. They are:

Dark Lord Alexandre

Dark Lady Elena

Light Lady Pamela Seaborn

Light Lady Coatlicue

If you have objections to this, please let us know at once. The meeting date is, after all, very close and cannot be changed, but we may be able to change the composition of those meeting you, as long as there are two representatives from Light and two representatives from Dark left.

Yours,

The wizards and witches of the Pact.

Harry hissed. He was sure the choice of meeting site had been deliberate, and probably made by someone who didn’t like him. His hand clenched on the letter, and he thought about tearing it. But Draco and Snape would want to know what had set him off, and Harry preferred to show them the exact words than a memory.

Besides, he thought, as his mind turned and raced across the letter again, he had better uses for his anger. He would go to the

meeting, he decided. It was better than starting a conflict with the Pact. He had enough enemies, and between rebuilding the Ministry and fighting Voldemort and making arrangements for defending every important place he could think of before the vernal equinox, he did not need war on another front.

But their choosing Hogwarts, as well as what Jing-Xi had taught him of etiquette between Lords and Ladies, gave him the opportunity to change things, to control the meeting in ways that they certainly could not have anticipated.

Harry suspected he was giving an evil grin. He didn't care. He would discuss his plans with Draco, Snape, Hawthorn, and others who might like to come with him and witness such a historic moment. Harry didn't *have* to let the Pact make this into a scolding for him if he didn't want to. He would make it his, instead, and the determination to do just that was scraping through him like an adamantite claw.

He turned away from the library, and made his way towards their bedroom. Summoning spells would and could wait. But the meeting was only two days away now, and he wanted his plans to be *perfect*.

"Are you all right, Connor?" Connor could hear Michael's stuttering steps behind him, as if he were shifting back and forth in the doorway of the library, but didn't know if he should come any closer. "Do you remember that you were supposed to meet me in the kitchen at ten-o'clock for another lesson in respect?"

"Go away, Michael," said Connor flatly, refusing to glance up from the printed page in front of him. *The proper ritual of greeting between Light wizards and witches takes into account age, place of meeting, gender, the dominance of the families involved, magical power, and several other factors that must be studied in detail before one will know the words to use. Each situation is, in point of fact, unique, and this book is intended only to give one an insight into shifting paradigms, not to serve as a guide.* Connor stifled a groan. Was it too much to hope for a book that just *told* one what to do? Many of the books at Hogwarts certainly seemed to. "I'm not in the mood to talk to you right now."

"Why *not*?" That sounded less like a pout and more like a request for clarity, Connor thought, which was hard to believe. He did lift his head from the book to stare at Michael as the other boy circled around the table.

"Because I have to learn these bloody dances," Connor sniped.

Michael's eyebrows went up, and stayed there. "I could teach you those," he offered. "In return, you could teach me more about respect and admiration, and living in the shadow of someone like Harry." A sneer on the name, but it didn't bother Connor so much this morning. He almost agreed with Michael, in fact. Yes, he knew he should have studied earlier, but that didn't mean he wanted Harry to humiliate him and rub his face in the fact. And Harry was *right*, too, which was the sting of it, and which writhed in Connor's belly long after he'd managed to ignore Harry's words themselves.

"You don't know the dances I have to learn," Connor told him. "They're Light ones, not Dark ones."

Michael blinked, as though he honestly hadn't thought of that. "Oh," he murmured. He sat down on the other side of the table, and looked wistfully at Connor across the book. Connor marveled at how easy it was to ignore the ugly, nearly-hand-shaped burn on his cheek. Once you got used to accepting it as part of his face, it was really no different than Harry's scar was, or Connor's own. "But does that mean you won't teach me?"

Connor studied him for a moment. Here was someone who needed his help, far more than Apollonis and Smith needed him to be a proper Light heir. And he was in the state of mind where he didn't absorb anything the book said anyway, because it kept filtering into his brain and encountering resistance.

He shoved the book aside, ignoring the little squirm of guilt, and said, "I can teach you right now."

Watching Michael's eyes light up with gratitude was *much* more fun than reading a dusty old book.

Jing-Xi studied the ruined stones of Hogwarts, currently covered with a light drifting of snow. She would not have imagined the place could still be so sad two months after its fall, but it was. The sensation of lost life lingered around it, and lost magic. It had been one of the oldest buildings she had ever been in. For that alone, wizards around the world should mourn it.

Elena and Alexandre stood on her left, Pamela and Coatlicue on her right. Jing-Xi stifled a sigh. Other than Pamela, who liked

Harry, the rest were there to challenge him and put him in his place, make him understand his smallness before the might of the Pact. Coatlicue might be of the Light, but she had a nearly neutral position where Harry was concerned, watching the ripples his actions had on the world and not liking them. She was watching the larger tapestry, not the fine threads.

Jing-Xi could not even blame her. If she had not known Harry personally, it was probably the position she should have taken, the right one. They should never forget that Harry was undeclared. It made him no closer to Light than Dark, when one looked at matters objectively. He might have morals that *seemed* Light, but that did not mean he would always achieve them through Light methods.

Jing-Xi was personally involved, though. Her heart had always led her astray. She had gone to Britain the moment she heard, through Thomas, that Harry was both willing to meet her and without any other guidance in the ways of Lord-level wizards. It was amazing that he had come as far as he had, since she'd had so little time to instruct him, and since the other Lords he had known were Dark and monsters, every one. Not to mention the abuse, the war itself, the fact that a Dark Lady had attacked him in search of his power...

She sighed aloud this time, and avoided Elena's dead-eyed glance. Her view on Harry was shared by no one else. She must remember that.

Cracks struck the air in front of them like whips, and Jing-Xi looked up in surprise. They were waiting on the right side of the school. Perhaps unreasonably, she had expected Harry to sense their magic and Apparate right in front of them.

Instead, by the sound of it, he had Apparated to the end of the road that led to Hogsmeade.

Beyond the limit of the old wards that restricted Apparition, Jing-Xi realized suddenly. Harry still remembered what Hogwarts had been, and it seemed he would allow that intuition to rule the meeting.

She bowed her head. In one way, it was all she could have hoped for, that sheer political necessity was not ruling Harry at the moment. On the other hand, if he came to the meeting too emotional, he would give the others a hold over him.

Elena and Coatlicue shifted. Jing-Xi had expected that. They were meeting Harry for the first time, assessing his strength and the ripples his power made in the air around them, or in their bones, or in the other ways they might sense it. Pamela and Alexandre didn't move. Jing-Xi shot them a curious glance, and Pamela flushed and avoided her gaze. *So. Perhaps what she constantly hinted at but couldn't tell me about involved visits to Britain in Alexandre's company.*

Harry took his time coming up the road, as if he knew that it would be wrong to come too suddenly and seem frightened, or to panic the representatives of the Pact. When he appeared, he moved at a sedate, comfortable pace, letting those who had accompanied him trail around him.

And many more people had come than Jing-Xi expected. She narrowed her eyes. There was Harry's Malfoy, and Severus Snape, and his brother, and perhaps he had wanted to have his own representatives of Light and Dark; that would explain the old golden-haired wizard, for example, and a witch whom Jing-Xi remembered as Hawthorn Parkinson. But the others, marching beneath banners of family symbols, or walking with quills in their hands to indicate their profession as newspaper reporters, or carrying cameras? Harry was shy of attention. Why would he want them here?

To confuse matters even further, Harry was carrying a stone in his hands.

He halted not far from Jing-Xi, and bowed to her first. Jing-Xi thought that could have been coincidence, since she stood in the middle, but she would have wagered Kanerva's gift of wind that it was not. Had she had pointed ears, they would have stood away from her head in curiosity.

Harry straightened and glanced at the other representatives, gaze cold. He didn't even flinch when Elena looked at him, though Jing-Xi saw his expression darken. "Jing-Xi has my permission to be here, having been invited long since," he said, his voice like the snow-dusted bulk of Hogwarts at their side in more ways than one. "What of you others? Why did you not ask permission from the Lord of the British Isles, as you call me, before arriving? I was under the impression that the etiquette of the Pact forbade inviting oneself in, but perhaps a great madness struck all of you at once."

Jing-Xi bit her tongue. She had not counted on this. True, that was a bit of etiquette that she herself had taught to Harry, but most of the time, it wasn't used in situations like this. Confronted with the massed power of four or five Lords and Ladies, even Monika would lower her eyes to the ground and play along for the time being.

Someone had forgotten to tell Harry about other situations like this, though. Jing-Xi clasped her hands in front of her, and settled

back to enjoy this.

“Traditionally, one need not request permission,” said Coatlicue, “if the Lord in question presents a great enough threat to the world.”

Harry gave a little nod. “Then tell me which specific actions of mine have presented such a threat,” he said, “so that I might correct them in the future. And if you give me the message, then I will carry it to Lord Riddle the next time I see him, though I cannot pretend he will agree.”

A muted chuckle moved through the ranks of those watching. Jing-Xi saw Pamela’s mouth tightening. She hated to be made a fool of. Coatlicue simply watched, Alexandre showed no change of expression, and Elena watched the way she always did, looking for prey.

“You must understand,” said Coatlicue, “that it is the fear of what you might do, and not what you have done, that has prompted this visit.”

“And what do you fear I might do?” Harry spoke calmly enough, but Jing-Xi could see the ire sparking in his green eyes. She doubted he really felt it—or, at least, that it was the only emotion he was capable of letting through. He was far more controlled than she had ever seen him, better at using his feelings instead of letting them use him, or simply experiencing them. “Is it similar to what Lord Riddle will do if he wins, extending his reign beyond the British Isles and into other countries without mercy, slaughtering anyone who does not agree with him?”

Elena moved a step forward. Jing-Xi doubted she truly wanted to answer, but it was a convenient cover for the way she was looking at Draco.

“The Lord Riddle is Dark,” Elena whispered, “Declared, a known quantity. You are not.”

“That does not change,” said Harry, his voice beginning far away and then gathering power like a tsunami, “the fact that I am the only Lord-level wizard currently fighting him, that the Pact sharply restricted the aid of those others who wanted to help, and that you have interfered, not once but multiple times, with my attempts to make sure his reign does *not* extend. This is only another example of such interference. You come without permission, violating your own rules, because I refuse to Declare. That is the motive behind your actions, all of them. Voldemort panics you, but you keep meddling with me, because you would rather dictate what I do than face the threat he poses.” Harry snorted. “And I have this to say to the Lords and Ladies of the Pact: if you refuse to obey your rules, why should I?”

Jing-Xi caught her breath. Harry had just taken the song to a new and dangerous level. She felt the wind whipping her hair move faster, and could hear a new tone in the hisses of the snakes climbing on Coatlicue. Pamela went curiously still. Jing-Xi didn’t know the two children of the Dark well enough to read what preparations they might have made for an attack.

“You are speaking of war, *vates*,” Coatlicue said, and Jing-Xi knew the title as much as the soft tone was an attempt to soothe Harry. “You do not want to start one over a mere matter of courtesy, do you?”

“If it began, it would be your fault, and for a reason even pettier than courtesy.” Harry set down the stone he was carrying at his feet. Jing-Xi could sense his power growing around him, in careful, controlled eddies that made her wince. Not only had Harry grown better since she began instructing him, he was drawing on the support and loyalty of most of the people behind him, the memories inherent in Hogwarts, and the fact that he stood on his native ground. All those factors could influence magic in ways that the Grand Unified Theory was only beginning to understand. They would still win if they had to fight him, of course, because their sheer strength was too much for him, but Jing-Xi was certain that Harry would manage to kill Pamela and Alexandre, the two weakest ones there, if it happened. Harry straightened and regarded them without a trace of the emotion he named next. “Fear.”

Elena hissed between her teeth, and edged closer to Draco. Harry turned to face her, and abruptly the air between them turned black with writhing snakes, floating on top of each other in a solid wall, their tails looped around each other, but their necks and fangs free to strike.

“Stay *back*,” Harry hissed at her, voice on the edge of Parseltongue. “And leave my partner alone. He is not for the likes of you.”

He has changed more than I imagined he could. Jing-Xi shivered at the sheer tone of possessiveness in Harry’s voice. Then she sighed as she saw the expression on Elena’s face. *And he has made another enemy.*

“I have nothing to say to you,” said Harry. “I have already struck a bargain with the International Confederation of Warlocks to

reveal no more of the British magical world to the Muggle one until after Voldemort is defeated, and my allies who disagreed with me have parted ways with me. When the war ends, then I will renegotiate at need. What you came to say to me about international courtesy has been invalidated by your own actions. I will not speak with hypocrites.” He twitched his wrist, and the snakes vanished as if they had never been. “Now, if you will excuse me, I will get on with my true reason for coming here.”

“What is that?” Jing-Xi asked, because she had to know.

Harry tossed her a glance slightly softer than he’d given the others. “Raising Hogwarts,” he said, and touched the stone he’d placed on the ground. “This is the cornerstone.”

And then the giant bulk of Hogwarts rose slowly into the air, rotating like a galaxy around a central hub. Jing-Xi could sense the restlessness circling in the magic itself, but Harry never let it get too far away from him. He turned and began speaking to the crowd, voice steady and clear, while what was left of the old school drifted overhead.

“One school has fallen. Another may rise in its place. No, I am neither Godric Gryffindor nor Salazar Slytherin, and may not claim for myself the serenity of Helga Hufflepuff nor the wisdom of Rowena Ravenclaw. But I may cleave to their traditions, and try to honor those fallen innocents who should never have had to perish in a war like this. For a thousand years, Hogwarts offered sanctuary to those in need. May it continue to do so.”

And the stones began to dance, arranging themselves around the new cornerstone in what looked like walls much the same, yet subtly different, from the walls of Hogwarts that Jing-Xi remembered.

In one stroke, Harry had changed the purpose of this meeting from a scolding to something that mattered to his land and people.

Jing-Xi had never felt so thorough a dismissal. She reached out and lightly grasped Coatlicue’s arm as her friend opened her mouth to comment.

“Look at it like this,” she breathed. “He’s made fools of us, and Elena threatened his partner, and we forgot the most basic of courtesy, and the Pact is even more unwilling to contribute forces to the fight against Lord Riddle than it is to stop interfering with Harry. He’s right. We made a bad decision. We should go now. These people aren’t ours. They won’t profit from our humiliation.”

Coatlicue would have argued, but that near-objectivity Jing-Xi had always envied her for was working now. She uttered one sigh, then made a curt gesture with one hand, beginning the group Apparition that would insure no one could linger behind.

Jing-Xi did hear Alexandre murmur, “Ridiculous, to interfere in the life of one so guarded by prophecy.”

She turned to look at him just before they vanished. He met her gaze, serene and insufferable as always, and for a moment Jing-Xi thought she heard the sweet singing of multiple active prophecies.

She caught one more glimpse of Harry just before they went, and that hardened her resolve to fight for him. He faced his people, and spoke what they needed to hear, and used his enormous magic to benefit and guard them.

He’s doing just what he should be. The Pact is going to have to wake up from its stubborn fear of him and see that. I’ll spend the rest of my days arguing if I must. Stubborn set of old men and women.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy-One: On Unneutral Ground

Owen laid down the parchment in front of Apollonis with an air of finality that he didn’t feel. But showing such nervousness to the old Light wizard was grounds for his proposal to be rejected yet again. He stood with his hands folded firmly in front of him and met Cupressus gaze for gaze.

“Ah.” Apollonis picked up the parchment and turned it over, as if he were reading every word on the underside. He probably was, Owen thought. No single concession that he’d tried to sneak past the acting Minister had worked, so in the end he’d listed everything clearly and straightforwardly. Apollonis leaned back and looked up at Owen now. “And you think that we will let Dark families have equal power in the Ministry with the Light families who have always served others?”

Owen drew an angry breath to respond that, if they didn’t, Harry would know why, and then shut his mouth with a shake of his head. Burst out with something like *that*, and Apollonis would have an excuse to dismiss him and request some other

representative for the Dark families from Harry. It wasn't so much that Owen would regret being back at his Lord's side, but Harry had asked him to do this. He wanted to succeed.

Besides, the work was interesting in and of itself, and at least Owen felt he was making some difference here, instead of sitting about in Silver-Mirror and watching as everyone else did more useful work.

"I would hope that you would, sir, yes," he said, evenly, his eyes never wavering from Apollonis's. "Since the new Ministry is committed to including those who did not have equal power in the old one, I would *hope* that a committed offer to the principles of that equality would serve." He made a little gesture at the parchment, and then sat down in the chair across from Apollonis, though he hadn't been invited to sit since the moment he entered the room.

Apollonis's eyes flashed. Owen wasn't sure what it meant, but he didn't intend to rise until he was *chased* out. His hands tightened on the arms of the chair, and he waited.

And, a moment later, Apollonis relaxed, even looked half-amused, as if he thought Owen's ready-to-attack posture a bluff or a feint, and turned back to the parchment. Owen kept a scowl from his face with effort. *He was testing me. Bloody bastard. Probably wanted to see if I could stand up to him. Well, Ignifer did say that he used to do that to her.*

Ignifer had said a great many other things about her father, none of them complimentary, so Owen expected the objection when Apollonis leaned across the desk and tapped one item on the parchment with his forefinger.

"This mandates that Dark families may enchant some offices so that the people working there will have an obligation to be loyal to them," Apollonis murmured. "It would rely on the office, and not the person."

Many such offices had existed in the old Ministry; Owen knew that Harry had even used one to his advantage once, when he called on Aurelius Flint and asked him to fulfill his office's debt to the Black line. He didn't have any proof that they existed yet in the Ministry, for either Light or Dark, but he had passed some rooms with spells and wards on them that he didn't recognize. So he held Apollonis's gaze and bluffed.

"If that is a power that you do not intend to allow us, I withdraw the point at once." He paused until that yellow gaze grew suspicious. "So long as the Light families who have already claimed superior advantages in our Ministry withdraw their own spells, of course, and swear to stick more closely to the rules. This is, in any case, a weaker group approaching a well-established group, not a group of upstarts requesting a privilege that the other doesn't have."

Those eyes narrowed. Owen waited, never blinking. If the offices he had intuited didn't exist, or the spells on them were meant to serve a different purpose—well, then he had just made a blunder, and he would wish he had apologized before all was through. But sometimes, one had to take a risk.

Apollonis sat back with a loud curse. "We *did* hope that no one had noticed," he said, with remarkable candor. But then, he was a Light wizard.

Owen made sure to pace his breath as it traveled out of his lungs, so that Apollonis wouldn't hear it as a nervous gasp, and nodded. "We have no objections to benefits," he said, and then paused to smile like a shark. "So long as they are shared with us, of course."

This time, the old wizard laughed openly, and then sat back to discuss the rest of the list with him. That did not mean the end of tricks, of course. Owen would have been slightly worried if it had.

Draco was the center of all eyes as he set the Pensieve on the table in front of him. He didn't mind that. In fact, he had to work hard to keep from visibly preening. That would say he relished all the attention being paid to him. Instead, he had to act as if this were normal and everyday.

"Now," he said, indicating the Pensieve. "This holds memories of mine where the mindset is perfectly clear. I brought it here to show you that the spell *does* work."

"But couldn't you just teach us the spell?" demanded a mousy little man whom Draco thought was probably a Nonpareil agent.

Draco gave him a sweet smile. "And not have demonstrated to you that it works, good sir? Then I would be at fault, for practically handing over a dangerous incantation that could have unpredictable results."

The man scowled and folded his arms over his chest. Draco wondered what position in the new Ministry he was hoping for.

They were gathered in one of the “Light” rooms on the fourth floor. At least, Draco thought of it that way, since the window giving onto the sun was especially large, and someone had already cast the Sourceless Torch spell that was going to light the new Ministry, filling the corners with soft white radiance instead of soft shadows. The only furniture was the pale wood desk on which Draco had placed the Pensieve, and clustered in front of him was everyone from Ministry officials to those hoping for jobs there to the merely curious. Luckily, given Harry’s announcement of Draco’s prowess in Silver-Mirror the other night, the “merely curious” crowd was large, and Draco could feel eyes in there focused on him.

He didn’t know the tenor of all the gazes. Some of them would be envious, he knew, and some admiring. He didn’t much care which was which, right now. He was in a large enough crowd that they couldn’t threaten him, and so he had nothing to do but bask in the attention he rightfully deserved.

He drew his wand now, and a few people stepped back. Draco only tapped the side of the Pensieve, however, and made the metal softly ring, in order to quell the faint conversations in the back of the room. “The spell is already cast,” he reassured them again. “Come.”

Those nearest edged forward and pushed their heads in beside his. Draco knew the others would be waiting impatiently for a report and the chance to try on their own, but he didn’t care. Rather than bring one large Pensieve to absorb them all, he preferred the smaller one that would imply multiple turns. That would cause the admiration and awe from the first set of gazers to ripple back into the rest of them, as those aroused from their trance gave extravagant descriptions, and made the rest all the more eager to see the truth for themselves.

Draco had chosen the memory carefully. Why wouldn’t he? This was a political tool, and, as such, it should have multiple valences. Others might think of it merely as a chance for Draco to prove that he could do what Harry said he could. But he was going to take the opportunity to make himself look good, of course.

The memory was of the battle in Woodhouse, and Draco winced a bit as he watched Fenrir Greyback spring out of the tall grass beside Woodhouse itself, snatch his broom in his teeth, and send Draco spinning to the ground. Not his finest moment, of course, and the audience could feel his panic and his fear. But, in another moment, they would also be able to admire his swift reflexes and his protective instincts.

And then there was the third purpose to this memory, of course.

That purpose came when Harry descended like fire and thunder and willed Fenrir Greyback out of existence. Draco could feel the fear and shock of the others with him billowing around him like a cold wind. His own superiority, meanwhile, grew across his mind like a cloud of smoke. They knew about Harry’s power already; it would be impossible to surprise them with that. What they *didn’t* know, or might not have known before now, was the extent to which Harry would go to protect Draco. And now they knew, and that might prevent stupid things like attacks on Draco that he had no time for.

Harry landed beside Draco on the ground, and then Whitecheek, Greyback’s mate, came for his back like a flying shadow.

Draco felt his own fear and determination meld into a single surge, which served to lift his arm straight out from his body and tear the Killing Curse from his wand. And Whitecheek died, a full-grown werewolf fallen to a boy just fifteen years old. Once again, awe swept through the people around him, and this time, there was fear, centered on him. Draco reveled in it.

He would, of course, welcome the impression that he had Harry’s power at his back, and therefore people should do what he told them to do, whether or not it was true. But he welcomed even more the idea that he was formidable in his own right. The stupid, the careless, the lazy, and the inappropriate should stay out of his way, and then he wouldn’t have to resort to violence like the Killing Curse.

The memory ended there. Draco shook his head and rose out of the silver liquid, to find himself standing beside the Pensieve with fascinated eyes riveted to him. *Merlin*, that was a good feeling, as if he stood in the middle of a sliding mass of honey. If he hadn’t known the explanation that came from Harry’s training, Draco would have wondered how in the *world* Harry could dislike the sensation.

“You used an Unforgivable,” one of his watchers whispered, a woman with straggly white hair and, currently, a death grip on the edge of the table, as if the very sight of the Killing Curse were enough to make her fall over.

“Tell me,” Draco said calmly, examining his nails, “what better use do you think it could have, then to kill a werewolf and one of

Voldemort’s minions who was pursuing the death of our only hope against Voldemort?” All of them flinched when he said the Dark Lord’s name. This was *hilarious*. Draco was grateful for the iron control of his face that kept him from laughing. “And who will punish me? The old Ministry, by whose laws this was a crime? Or the new Ministry, which hasn’t gathered itself enough yet to declare the Unforgivables a crime?”

“You should be in Tullianum,” the old woman persisted.

Draco met her gaze and shrugged his shoulders. “A little difficult, seeing that Tullianum lies in ruins, and has for months,” he said. “If Harry had wanted to arrest me or give me to the Ministry at the time it happened, he could have. That he chose not to...” He let the words dangle, and then waved the people still crowded in front of the table to move back, because the ones behind them were shoving at them, desperate to get near the Pensieve and see the memory for themselves.

It had been a risk, of course. There were people revolted at the very mention of the Killing Curse, people who forgot that the Aurors had been granted permission in the First War to use it for a time, people who forgot that they would probably use it themselves against enemies too powerful to defeat—people who forgot that, in their fifth year, Harry had fought with a ragtag band of allies, not the powerful political force it had become since.

Draco might inspire some disgust.

But, from the looks in some eyes, he’d inspired more fear, and that he could more than live with. Fear was the beginning of respect in many people. Draco wasn’t blind to the way that people flinched when Harry walked into a room, even though Harry was. They respected power, yes, and by this time, they also respected that Harry would live up to his principles, but they also cowered from what that magic could do.

Draco wanted to make his own reputation. Fear would be one of the necessary components.

Looking around the room, he caught his father’s gaze. Draco inclined his head, and let his eyes ask, as clearly as he could without actually speaking the words, whether Lucius was here to gather support for his run for the Minister’s office. Lucius turned and stalked away.

When his cloak passed, Michael Rosier-Henlin stood where he had been, staring at Draco with obvious longing.

Out of pity for an old partisan, Draco turned in profile, where he knew he looked best, and then plunged his head into the Pensieve. Michael’s gaze went with him like treacle, clinging where it wasn’t welcome.

His admiration *was*, of course. Just not the manner in which he had chosen to express it, and that unforgivable presumption that Draco would ever leave Harry for him, a nearly talentless, far too impetuous wizard who wouldn’t even be alive now if it weren’t for Harry’s freeing Durmstrang, and who had first borne the lightning bolt scar on his arm and then lost the right to do so.

“Harry!”

Harry jolted out of a sound sleep over the book of summoning spells, and then relaxed a bit. It was Thomas, clutching a book, and sometimes he had a habit of waking people like that for nothing more urgent than to share the latest bit of new information he’d found. Thomas’s children were visiting Silver-Mirror, and since he now had his daughter Rose to share his fascinations with, his waking Harry up had grown a bit less frequent of late.

But the expression on his face was indignant, and Harry found himself standing. “What is it, Thomas?”

“The centaurs,” said Thomas, folding his arms. “They went to the Ministry, and now there are some people forbidding them entrance, claiming they’re animals and halfbreeds and they can’t come in.”

Harry hissed between his teeth. He could imagine that all too clearly, even given that Apollonis and most of those who had attained “unofficial” power in the new Ministry would invite the centaurs in. “How many of them?” he asked, as he unwound his arms from the chair’s and stood up. “And how did you learn of this?”

“I was in the Ministry, trying to catalogue their library.” Thomas tightened his arms defensively around the book he carried. “I left as the centaurs arrived. *Hemlock* was leading them, and they couldn’t get in!”

Harry nodded. Hemlock was one of Thomas’s contacts on centaur magic and the way it related to the Grand Unified Theory,

which promptly meant, of course, one of Thomas's best friends in the whole world. "I'll come, Thomas."

Thomas beamed, caught his arm, and hustled him towards the entrance to the library, where he could come outside the wards and Apparate to the Ministry more easily.

Harry did lift a hand and conjure a sending of himself for Snape, with his mouth full of the message that he was going to the Ministry in Thomas Rhangnara's company, to solve a diplomatic incident. He wondered, though, as Thomas dragged him down the stairs and outside by main force of strength, whether he should really solve this one the way he had all the others.

His magic couldn't be the sole governing force in the new Ministry, especially since he didn't intend to take on the post of Minister, and still considered his *vates* path and the defeat of Voldemort his primary responsibilities. And people couldn't cooperate forever, sullenly, in the shadow of his power. They had to learn to do this on their own, live with people of other species, or what good was anything they'd done? It wouldn't make new ideas blossom and grow among those wizards and witches whom Harry wanted to see change. It would follow the same pattern it always had: the powerful, dominating wizard, who got his way because other people were afraid of his magic.

So Harry decided that he could try something—especially now, since when they arrived at the Ministry, he could see that both the group of centaurs at the doors and the group of humans staring at them were small. And Thomas had arranged it so that he would be nearby if anything happened. He reached up and touched Thomas's sleeve before the man could drag him near enough to be seen.

"I want you to help them," he whispered.

Thomas turned and stared at them, then shook his head. "But, Harry, they won't *listen* to me," he said, indicating the group of wizards and witches who blocked the centaurs' entrance into the Ministry. "They're *stupid*."

Harry smiled. It was often hard to stop doing that around Thomas. Currently, he wondered how hard it was for Thomas to live in a world where most people seemed to ignore his brilliance and the very simple things that he believed in and which anyone, he thought, could see if they just studied enough.

"I'll be right here, ready to help if you need me," he said. "But hiding. I don't think it's true freedom if people change their minds because I ask them to, Thomas. Do you? They should change their minds on their own. Or because someone brilliant, but not a Lord-level wizard, persuades them to do so."

Thomas looked as if Harry had just given him a new library. He glanced towards the centaurs for a moment, opened his mouth, then shut it and gave a firm nod. He strode into the confrontation with a mutter that sounded to Harry like, "It's *Hemlock*. He's smart, and they're not. I have to help him."

Harry used his magic to wrap the *Extabesco plene* around himself and hide him from not just human sight but the keener senses of the centaurs. He watched eyes and faces and hands and hooves, looking for some sign of growing hostility, but determined not to intervene unless he had no other choice to prevent people from being injured.

They have to learn to live without me. And if there's anyone who can scold people into living a better life, it's Thomas.

Thomas wished it were a permissible punishment to drub people over the head with a book until they paid attention. Or, even better, the book could be one of common sense and morality, and each hit could impart the knowledge that the book contained.

Thomas was tempted to disappear into daydreams of how he would enchant such a book, but the angry faces before him reminded him of his course. He walked right in between a shouting witch and Hemlock, and stood there, glaring at her. *She is stupid to yell at centaurs. They are not impressed by raised voices except to view them as signs of just how impatient and unworthy of sharing space with them humans are.*

Of course, no one in front of him knew that, because they were all stupid.

"Why are you stupid?" he asked the witch, who had shut her mouth and stared at him as if she didn't know what else to do.

She flushed at once, and lifted her wand as if she would smack him across the palm with it. Thomas's mother used to do that, but obviously someone hadn't done it enough to this witch with a child, because otherwise she wouldn't have been stupid. Thomas slapped the wand away with his book, careful of the cover. This was a rare old volume of Fishbaggin's goblin histories. He

wouldn't want to get sweat stains on it, or the drabs of a spell, either.

"You know that centaurs are welcome here," he said. "The Ministry said so. *Vates* Harry Black said so. And you are standing here, denying entrance to fellow citizens, and being stupid. Why are you stupid?"

"They shouldn't be welcome," fumed the witch. "I'll have you know that centaurs raped my sister."

"Where?" Thomas demanded. He hadn't heard of a centaur rape happening on British soil in centuries, since the herd in the Forbidden Forest had been so thoroughly bound. Centaurs from other countries, visiting the Forest or brought in by foreign wizards, had sometimes raped people, but that was rare.

"In Greece!"

Thomas turned around and indicated Hemlock and the others behind him. Hemlock had his arms folded and his tail twitching, which was a sure sign that he didn't like the behavior of the people facing him. Thomas was sorry, but he didn't think that stopping to apologize now would make the wizards and witches in front of him realize how stupid they were being. "And do these centaurs look as if they've been in Greece to you?" he asked.

"They *could* have been." The witch folded her arms in turn. "One centaur looks like all the others to me. All I know is that I'm not having them in the Ministry, *creatures* who could do that."

"Humans rape, too!" Thomas could not believe the sheer insanity of the universe sometimes. People acted as if he and the other research wizards had concocted the Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic as an affront to their personal honor, and now this. "Would you want to shut all humans out of the Ministry because some of them rape sometimes? Or because Voldemort tortures people, and so that must mean that other humans torture people?"

"That's different," the witch countered. "Humans are different from each other. Just because one person does that doesn't mean we'll all do that." Thomas scowled. He hated it when people thought "human" and "person" were equivalents to one another. "But centaurs are all the same."

"How do *you* know?" Thomas asked.

"Excuse me?"

"How do you know that?" Thomas repeated. "Have you read the histories of centaur migration, and the different ways they interpret the stars? Have you ever heard of the way that centaurs negotiated with the Ministries, and the different ways they resolved their problems with wizards in each country? Have you heard of Sagittarius and the legacy he left and how difficult that was to resolve? Do you have the least idea of what the centaurs struggle with? Have you even *heard* of Orion the Black? Of course not," he went on, while the woman simply stared at him. "You just think that centaurs are rapists, and that's all you know about them. If you'd paid close enough attention to the news to see something beyond the end of your nose, you would have realized that this centaur herd asked the *vates* for help years ago. He freed them from their web, but, at the same time, made them unwilling to rape. One of their own *died* for that, made a willing sacrifice so they could fit into the world better and have their freedom. Until someone human is willing to die like that, and until we've endured slavery to compare to theirs, I don't think you have a right to deny them the Ministry!"

He was shouting by the end, but he didn't care. Willing ignorance *maddened* him. It was one thing when he knew people were intelligent and hadn't heard of his theories—then he could just explain them—but another altogether when there were things happening around them they should have known before they started talking ignorantly, and they just went ahead and talked ignorantly anyway.

They are so stupid, he thought, as he watched the witch in front of him go through several shades of pale. *And they don't have to be. Why don't people want to educate themselves? Why? Why don't they care more about people around them, and want to know about them, instead of only knowing about themselves? Why?*

Hemlock touched his shoulder with one light hand. Thomas turned and looked up at him. It could be hard to read centaur faces, at least for a wizard who didn't want to learn, but he could make out a spark deep in the blue eyes looking back at him.

I spoke well for them. I didn't disgrace them, or say something they wouldn't have endorsed. Thomas beamed back at them. It was always best to let people speak for themselves, of course, but the wizards and witches would only have listened to another wizard just then. Now came the moment when Thomas had bought them silence, and Hemlock could actually talk without shouting. Centaurs hated shouting, and had never seen the purpose.

Thomas stepped aside.

Hemlock nodded to the witch who still watched them as though trying to respond to that torrent of information. “It is quite true,” he said. “We cannot rape, thanks to the efforts of the *vates*. It is for that effort that we promised him aid in war, and indicated interest in joining in human politics.” He paused for a moment, while his hoof scraped the ground in front of him. “I am sorry for your sister, but we are not the ones who raped her. And we do not let prejudice against humans rule us. Will you let prejudice against centaurs rule you?”

Thomas could see the way this worked. The witch in front of Hemlock kept sneaking little side-glances at Thomas as she answered. It was really still his voice that she was responding to, a human voice instead of the centaur one that actually spoke, and that was bad, not ideal. Thomas scowled.

Then he brightened. Not everyone would catch that nuance. Some people would think she was talking to Hemlock as an equal, and given that impression, some people would treat the centaurs more like equals because they had seen other people do so. So the truth could spread through a deception, or a mistaken impression.

Thomas’s favorite tactic was using willing ignorance against itself. If the people watching thought that this witch could learn to grant intelligence to centaurs, then they could learn. They might even feel *shamed* into learning, which was all right with Thomas. They should have learned already. Stupid people.

“I—I accept your sympathy,” she said. “I don’t like and I don’t trust you, but it may work. For now,” she added, grudgingly, and stepped out of the way. “I’ll accompany you to the Acting Minister’s office, you know. Just in case.”

Hemlock nodded, and the other three centaurs behind him cantered into the Ministry. The wizards and witches closed in around them, and Thomas decided that he should go with them, just in case they had any unfortunate ideas before they reached Cupressus Apollonis.

Besides, he needed to observe more willing ignorance in its own habitat, so that he could come up with plans for that book that would deliver a drubbing and knowledge at the same time.

Harry let himself melt back into view. His face hurt from his hard grin.

Merlin, *that* was the way to do it, to give people a chance to yell and figure it out *themselves*. This was what he had once hoped the monitoring board could do: provide a base of coherent opposition to him.

There *had* to be opposition to him, or there was no *vates* path. There was only frightened silence, with no one daring to speak up because they thought his power would conquer them. Silence didn’t mean agreement, it just meant stifled disagreement, and Harry had never wanted that. People should be free to yell in his face, to say stupid things, to make requests of him that he was never going to honor. It might infuriate him, and it might sometimes endanger others enough to require his intervention, but at least it would mean he was not a Lord and the British wizarding world was still free of a single dominating presence.

And to see people solving problems *themselves*...

It made his face hurt.

He Apparated home, humming under his breath, and arrived at the same moment as Draco, who had been showing off the Pensieve with his mindset-spell in it to the Ministry. Harry caught him and swung him around in Silver-Mirror’s entrance hall, enchanting the walls to sing the same music they’d played at the Ministry on its official opening night. He reenacted the dance they’d done there with a very startled and confused Draco, who looked as if he didn’t know whether to laugh or slow Harry down and demand an explanation.

“What happened?” he said at last, clamping his hands on Harry’s shoulders and making him stop the spin.

Harry grinned at him, and Draco put his hand over his eyes and squinted. Harry retracted his magic with a murmured apology. It liked to make his eyes and teeth shine brightly lately, at least when he was happy. “I just saw people accept centaurs into the Ministry with Thomas’s intervention,” he said. “I didn’t have to step in and use my magic or my tongue to mediate. They managed it *themselves*. I think Thomas wanted to hit them with a book, and there were lots of stupid things said, but they managed it.”

Draco, of course, understood that in his own way. A slow smile widened across his face. “You’ll have time for more things than playing nursemaid.”

“Yes.” Harry tugged insistently at his wrist. “Come with me. I want to hear what happened to you at the Ministry, and then I want to invent spells. As many of them as we can before dinner.”

Draco’s face softened into a look of something like adoration. Harry made sure the like emotion was shining in his eyes as he kissed Draco on the nose. Then he dragged him up the stairs. Thomas had dragged Harry down them. Harry was just making sure there was some symmetry.

Merlin, he was happy. Thoughts didn’t have to make sense when he was this happy.

Connor sighed and flipped through the book again. He knew the Light rituals of greeting now, and they weren’t really that hard to master. But they still made his brain hurt, like the Divination symbols had. Yes, he could study them, he could learn them, but he wasn’t really sure he *wanted* to.

Then the door of the library opened. Connor turned around, hoping it was Harry. He’d seen his brother asleep earlier over a book of summoning spells, and while he wanted to apologize, he also didn’t want to disturb him. Harry got little enough unbroken sleep in his life.

Parvati peered through the door at him. Connor shoved his book aside. Parvati was biting her lip and looked close to tears, and that usually meant another vicious fight with her parents.

“What is it?” he asked, holding out his hands to her.

Parvati crossed the library to meet him, and took and held his hands. Connor pulled her close, stroking her hair. He loved the way it smelled—not like anything in particular, but like her.

She whispered a word against his collarbone. Connor sat back. “What?”

She looked him in the eye, and then spoke words that set fire to his heart.

“I said yes. Let’s do it.”

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy-Two: Nothing Gold Can Stay

Connor knelt on the floor in front of Parvati. They’d chosen her bedroom for the ceremony, since it was the one room where they were the least likely to be disturbed. No one shared it with her, now that Padma had gone home to their parents, and Harry probably wouldn’t come looking for him here. Once they began the ceremony, it couldn’t be ended.

Parvati had a mulish look on her face, as if she were about to jump off a cliff someone had told her not to jump off. Connor smiled and squeezed her hands, which he held clasped in front of him. He couldn’t touch her cheek, as he wanted, until the ritual was over.

“Not what you expected?” he whispered.

“Not what my parents wanted for me,” Parvati clarified, with a little toss of her head. “But I *don’t* care. I won’t care, Connor.” She took a deep breath, and then the clutch of her hands on his intensified almost to the point of pain. “My parents would want something safer for me, a husband and children who wouldn’t endanger me. They think Voldemort will go away and leave the world unchanged. But I don’t think he will, and I think that we could be in danger even after the war is over, if his enemies want to hurt people important to Harry.” She lifted her head and clenched her jaw. “I don’t care about that.”

Connor paused. He ordinarily wasn’t so sensitive to the nuances of language, but since he was the one who had suggested this ritual, he supposed the magic might already be heightening his awareness. “You don’t care what they say, Parvati, but do you really want this?” he whispered, eyes fastened to her face.

At once she melted, and leaned near enough to kiss the top of his knuckles. “Yes, I do, Connor,” she whispered. “Even when I’m exasperated with you, I love you. This isn’t going to go away.”

Connor smiled, and began. Luckily, only the first part of the ritual was in Latin, because he wouldn’t have wanted to try either his memory or his pronunciation skills with dozens of sentences.

“*Animae ambae*,” he whispered, and the air around him took on a slow, sunlit tinge, as if he and Parvati were the center of their own private dawn. Connor took a deep breath. The air had turned sweet, too, filled with the perfume of a thousand flowers. Then the excess perfumes cleared away, and he could smell only one that he recognized from the Hogwarts greenhouses as snapdragons.

And why not snapdragons? They come in red and gold.

The scent traveled away from him to embrace Parvati; Connor could see the moment at which her nose identified the flowers involved, too. He stifled the impulse to lean forward and kiss her, which was not allowed right now, and waited for her to begin the second part of the ritual.

“*Animae ambae usquequaque*,” she whispered, and Connor thought she would stumble on the long last word, but she didn’t. She finished in what was almost a shout, in fact, and a pendulum of light swung past her and impacted with Connor’s face, leaving him blinking and dazzled.

But the magic had done what it was supposed to. When he could see again, Connor realized he wasn’t gazing at Parvati, but at a memory, as sharp and clear as if he were experiencing it for the first time.

“It’s a surprise,” Connor said in a superior tone, tugging on Harry’s arm. “So I can’t tell you what it is yet. And *keep your eyes closed!*” he added, as he saw Harry’s eyes start to flutter open when they stumbled over a small depression in the ground. Since he had glasses, Harry was always a little more scared of where they were going.

His brother obediently shut his eyes, but he said, “This could be dangerous, Connor. I wouldn’t want to get you into trouble.”

“I’m never in trouble with Mum,” said Connor airily, because it was true. He got into far more trouble with Remus, while Sirius just ruffled his hair and called him “little pup,” and his father couldn’t hide a smile—remembering similar things he’d done, Connor knew—while scolding him. “Come on. This is it.” He tugged Harry to the very edge of the pond near their house in Godric’s Hollow, then cleared his throat impressively. “Now. Look straight down, and not up or sideways or backwards, because that would diminish the impact.” That was a phrase he’d heard their mum use the other day, and he was very proud of himself for remembering it.

Harry looked straight down.

And caught his breath. Connor grinned, nudging his twin with an elbow almost hard enough to make him fall into the water.

“Aren’t they brilliant?” he said, and proudly surveyed their own private clutch of tadpoles again. The tiny frogs trailed their tails over each other as they darted back and forth in search of food. This close, Connor could see the mad flutter of their gills. He wondered what would happen if he were to duck his head under the water. Could they see his lungs, and would they think the mad flutter of *those* was funny?

“Very brilliant,” Harry agreed softly, and stooped down, running one hand through the water. He captured a tadpole, but didn’t try to pull it out. Instead, he just knelt there and stared at it swimming against his palm.

Connor scooped up a handful of water and frog, and blew gently across the surface before it could all drain out of his hands. The tadpole turned and turned and turned, but couldn’t find a way out. Connor snickered and dropped it back into the pond, where it almost collided with one of its brothers.

“What do you think we would be like if we were tadpoles?” he asked his brother. “Do you think we’d know we were twins? Or maybe they’re *all* twins? Would you still help me?”

“Always,” Harry said solemnly, even as he pulled his hand out of the pond. “I’d show you where all the best food was.”

Connor made a face and laughed, because he didn’t want to think about what tadpoles liked to eat. In fact, he wanted to go back

to the house and have lunch right now, because the taste of sandwiches would be *much* more appetizing than whatever pond scum the little frogs ate.

Harry followed him up the bank, smiling now and then when Connor glanced back at him. Harry only smiled like that for him, never at their mother or their father or Sirius or Remus. Connor liked it.

Parvati opened her eyes slowly after the vision, shaking her head. She hadn't expected to share the memory, though she knew from the ritual that the magic would invite in images of those people who also had some claim to share a soul with them, to be part of their circle. But she had expected that Connor would see his brother, and she would see her sister.

That wasn't the case. And Parvati found herself unsure how to react to what she saw: with Connor's delight or the pain she knew he would be feeling now, as he considered the childhood memory in the light of all the changed years that had passed since.

But she didn't have a lot of time to think about it, thankfully, because they were passing on to the next part of the ceremony—this one in English. Parvati turned their hands so that their joined fingers faced the ground. She knew from Connor's face that this was uncomfortable for him, and almost smiled. *You don't know what discomfort is until you have to spend two hours on your knees because Mother and Father were fighting over the New Year's Ritual they wanted to use.*

Right now, the magic rested with her, and so she was the one who needed to invoke both the next part of the ritual and the next vision, which she knew would involve Padma. Parvati spoke confidently, thinking of her dedication to the Light and the fact that her heritage came from a Light pureblood family. An unfamiliar ritual couldn't slow her down or frighten her, and this ritual had the added benefit of not really being *unfamiliar*, just not one she would have ever expected Connor to choose. He was so *modern*, really, though with his brother, one had to be. And this was a ritual that had been used to bind couples centuries ago, and then not much used since.

One of the most potent Light marriage rituals, in fact, commonly believed to tie souls to each other so that they would be born near one another again and again.

Parvati lifted her eyes to Connor's face, and whispered, "As my blood and my breath and my bone, so be close to me, beloved."

She gave a little shudder as the first tremors of the magic racked her. The breath was easy enough to give, since it was already flowing off her lips to join the world, but it was a bit more complicated for the magic to take blood and bone from her. She felt the upper bone in her left arm grow a bit weaker, and made a note to rest it for the next week or so. And then she swayed as the blood seemed to stream away from just under her heart, but she didn't fall to the floor and separate their hands, which was a good thing. If that had happened, they would have had to start the ritual all over again.

Connor opened his mouth, as he needed to, and a stream of mingled red and white flowed in at his lips. Connor swallowed, blinking, his eyes watering, but he didn't vomit in spite of what he had to eat. Parvati smiled at him, proud. Then she turned forward as the light glowed around her and flowed into a new image, one of a memory she remembered sharing with Padma when they were both eleven, on the night before they started off for Hogwarts.

"What do you think it'll be like?" Padma was turned on her side in her bed, one foot scraping the floor. Parvati smiled. That was a sign that she was worried. She could try to hide it, try to make her face all smooth and adult, but the foot always gave her away.

"You've heard Mum and Dad's stories." Parvati let a yawn interrupt her, half-hoping her sister would take the hint and go to sleep, but Padma had always been bad at hints, unless they were clues to mysteries in a story. "I think it'll be like that. The Sorting Hat, classes, Slytherin House being a bunch of gits—"

"I didn't mean *that*."

"Then tell me what you meant," Parvati snapped. "Because our telepathy's deserted me again."

It was an old joke of theirs, that they really did have the telepathy that people always assumed wizard twins did; theirs was just broken. But Padma didn't crack a smile this time. "I meant sleeping in separate beds," she said, leaning forward to stare at Parvati. "Separate Houses. It could happen, you know. Sometimes twins are put into the same House, but not always."

Parvati blinked. "Oh," she said at last, because she hadn't even thought of that. She had simply assumed that she would go to the

same House her sister did. How could they be separated? Yes, Padma liked to read more than she did, and sometimes their mother teased Parvati about being a candidate for Hufflepuff, with the stubborn silence she maintained on Padma's involvement in her pranks, but they were *twins*. That mattered more than little things like books.

Maybe not so little. The Sorting Hat judges by personality traits, you know, and it might put you in different Houses.

Parvati chewed her hair for a minute, then leaned across the distance between their beds and took her twin's hand. Padma sat up. She knew a solemn moment when she saw one.

"We'll make a pact," said Parvati, lightly, which made Padma pay even more attention. She knew Parvati could joke in that tone, or she could be deadly serious. "To still talk about the important things. To be twins, even if the Hat *does* think that we'll be in separate Houses." To her, it seemed ridiculous, but it could happen. And she knew having shelters against ridiculous things that could still happen was always a comfort to Padma. She was the one who looked up the plants and charms that would counter rare magical creatures and put them around the doorways and windows of their house "just in case."

Padma nodded. "And what words should we use for the pact?" she asked. "What oath?"

Parvati kept herself from rolling her eyes. It was hard, but this was *Padma*, wanting old words instead of their own words. She always wanted something old, and Parvati could sometimes understand that—sometimes, old things were beautiful—but most of the time she thought her sister should be a little more daring.

"There's an oath I read in a book the other day," she said, making it up completely.

"You read?" Padma gasped.

Parvati shoved at her shoulder. "Shut *up*. The truth is, there *is* an oath that I read in a book, and it goes like this."

She recited a few star names, to make it seem more impressive, and, by the end of those, Padma was looking suitably impressed. In truth, their mother had just taken Parvati outside last night and showed her the stars that had those names, but books had the names *written down*, which was more powerful than words with breath behind them. Then Parvati said, "And we promise that we'll always be sisters and act like sisters, no matter what Houses, or Cassiopeia will come and strike us down."

Padma's eyes were wide. "*Really?*"

Parvati nodded firmly. "Really."

Padma recited the star names and the oath in turn, and Parvati didn't know about her, but she felt a flare of power around their hands, and was content that they were joined in the best way she could think of. Then Padma finally let go of her hand and went to sleep, and that was all Parvati had wanted, really. She turned over in her own bed, and shut her eyes.

She didn't know what Padma would do, really, when she sat under the Sorting Hat—and it would be her turn first. But Parvati suspected *she* would end up in Gryffindor. It was the House where she would probably find people willing to agree that a made-up oath was a good thing, as long as it shut your sister up and made her go to sleep.

Connor opened his eyes and blinked. For a moment, he couldn't stop himself from being envious, though if he thought of it carefully, that was as silly as being envious that Parvati and Padma had been born identical, while he and Harry had been born fraternal. But they *had* had a special relationship, and without a hint of parental abuse or secrets lingering in the background.

And then Parvati was watching him impatiently, and Connor realized that he had a ritual to conduct. The magic was with him now. He coughed and cleared his throat. That was permissible.

Since he'd forgotten the words, he really needed that moment of space the coughing and clearing of the throat provided.

Luckily, it worked, and the next words came off his lips as though made to be there. "By air and water and fire, all the powers of motion, be close to me, beloved."

He closed his eyes as a cold sweat popped out all over his body—the ritual's magic pulling the water from him. The air seemed to leave his lungs in the next moment, and then he shivered; the "fire" would come from his spirit, which he knew, but he had never known that it would feel like someone planting a lump of ice directly in the middle of his chest.

He opened his eyes in time to see Parvati swallowing what looked like a mixture of water and air, the water separated into neat strips of blue with equal strips of clear space between them. A moment later, she winced, and one hand flexed in his as if she would like to take that hand away and touch her chest. So the fire had probably come to her, too. Connor didn't relax until he saw the light move away from him and back to Parvati, though. It was the only way that he *knew* this had worked.

Parvati's voice was clear as she gazed into his eyes. "Willingly we have bound ourselves to each other, by the powers of our bodies, and by the powers of our souls. We have shared visions of those who have some claim to stand in the circle. But we have not yet intruded on our history." She stamped with one foot, and Connor saw trceries of green and gold rise from the floor where the stamp landed, twining up her leg and reaching towards him like vines. *Not Indigena's vines*, he reminded himself, even though it did seem uncomfortably like that. *Indigena is dead*. "Will you share your family with me, beloved, as I share mine with you?"

"I will," Connor said, even though he could feel his face flushing. It was one thing for "everyone" to know what his family had done to both his brother and him, and what that meant. It was another thing altogether for Parvati to share his mind and *know* how it felt, what he thought and did about it. But he had begun the ritual knowing he would have to do this, and it was rather too late to back out now.

Parvati nodded, and stamped down her other foot. This time, a collection of greenery and gold began to crawl up Connor's leg. When it reached his thigh, it flowed across the space between them and collided, intertwining, with the vines of light that had grown up Parvati's.

The world between them vanished. Connor thought, in the moment before the light swallowed them, that a second sunrise had taken place around them, as if the ceremony were guiding them back to the dawn of time, and the beginning of the Potter and Patil lines.

Parvati watched in amazement as a house reared itself before her eyes. Then she shook her head. *Of course this doesn't mean that Lux Aeterna was built with magic alone. I'm seeing the house as it grew. Perhaps one Potter ancestor added one wing, and the second another bedroom, and the third a porch.*

She could feel the moment when the balance of power in the house truly changed, though, when a Potter ancestor brought home something that shone and flashed and heaved like a sea of metal, and had ambitions of its own. The Maze, she knew; Connor had told her about it. But it was another thing altogether to feel that mind brushing against hers, searching, questing, and then turning away in uninterest because she was not a Potter. Parvati shivered and wrapped her arms around herself—at least, she did if she still had arms. She was not sure if she had a body anymore, or if she stood embodied in the vision alone.

Like being judged by the sun itself.

She turned, and people were coming and going on either side of her, cupping their hands around their mouths to shout, battling with swords, dueling with wands. Now and then she saw a death, a man falling with his mouth swelling with blood, a woman perishing as she ran from her enemies and collapsed into a thicket of brush, but more often she saw the raw material of life. The Potter ancestors moved along their tracks and refused to pay attention to her. Of course, most of them had never known her, so Parvati wouldn't expect much attention from them.

She moved away from the house, walking slowly among them. She saw one woman, with a face lovely in its determination alone, running from a shape that swooped behind her as gold and red fire, now and then staring at a compass in her hand. She saw a woman speaking to a tribe of brownies, and nodding when the nearest one said something to her in a voice too high-pitched for Parvati to make sense of it. She saw another woman holding up a baby boy with a weary, peaceful expression in her eyes. Parvati found she would have liked to know the story of that woman most of all. There was something about the way she tucked the baby into a cot that said she had known much sorrow, and even the baby's birth was not without sorrow, but it might be the beginning of an end to grief. Since she had always thought that parents had the most to be worried about, Parvati wondered how that could be.

She saw a young man with a jawline and nose that looked like Connor's dancing with a woman, while his gaze went again and again to another man across the room, a man who kept his back pointedly turned. She saw a man who could almost have been Harry if not for his grey eyes backing slowly away from a portrait from which blackness swirled to engulf him. She saw James Potter gently putting a flower on the lid of a shut casket.

There were dazzling images, like thunderbolts, of Courtroom Ten in the old Ministry, where Parvati knew the trial had been held.

There were more flashes, probably camera flashes, and she knew that she was in Connor's memories now. She slowed and watched more attentively.

And she knew him better than she ever had before, not from the glimpses of his actions, but from the sense of his personality that seethed around her like water. She knew that he was stubborn, yes, but she had never realized that he was stubborn enough to drive himself into exhaustion just to prove a point. And she had never known that his daring went deep enough that he could make the greatest of sacrifices just because he thought it was right. Fear wasn't quite a stranger to him, but it was enough of a stranger to make him the perfect candidate for Gryffindor, almost the stereotype of their shared House.

Parvati envied that courage. She had often found she had trouble acting, at least until all the other avenues of action were eliminated and there was only one way forward.

And then she stepped around a corner and found herself in a boundless ocean of impulsiveness. Connor did things because they seemed like good ideas at the time, without thinking them through. Those could be taunts and insults to people he shouldn't taunt and insult, or they could be acts of reckless generosity. The main commonality was the never thinking, the leaping and trusting to fate.

Parvati shook her head, a helpless smile curling her lips. She understood, now, both where Connor had found the impulse to propose to her using an ancient Light ritual, and why he had insisted on sticking close to it even after he found out the requirements and how difficult the vows could be to keep.

And bursting on her like flicker after flicker of an eternal sunrise was that conviction he had already explained to her, that one should take happiness where it was found. Seize the sun, don't let it race past.

Parvati held her arms open. She might not always agree with that philosophy, but she could certainly embrace it.

Connor drew a breath, and found himself coughing. There were unfamiliar flowers all around him, and the shivering, shifting fronds of unfamiliar plants. He turned in a circle, and saw only more plants. He knocked them aside, and there were trees, the trunks at last, swaying so far above him that he couldn't help but feel small.

He stepped forward, and the flowers and trees streamed away on either side of him to reveal the river that hid behind. Connor could see people moving determinedly along the river, driving reluctant cattle, washing clothes, casting garlands of flowers into the water, avoiding the wakes of motion that spoke of crocodiles. Most of the women had black hair and dark brown skin, like Parvati's, but Connor couldn't tell which ones were the more distant ancestors. Now and then they spoke words he couldn't understand, in a language that danced with the water and their motions, and left Connor feeling like an outsider.

But the ritual had brought him here so that he could understand the history of the Patil line, not reject it. It was *his* fault if he felt like that. Connor lifted his chin and stepped forward, determined to be involved.

The scene shifted away from the water and into large houses built in a style Connor had no name for. The houses rose and surged and fell, becoming small sometimes, turning into temples sometimes, becoming open clearings sometimes before they grew walls again. Connor grasped that the fortunes of the Patil line had changed over time. That, he did understand.

A woman with black hair that swept the forest floor battled a fire that tried to burn down a good portion of the trees she felt responsible for, and collapsed in exhaustion only near morning, when her husband came with the help he'd run to bring. A woman with a circle instead of a wand cast a spell Connor had never heard before, and a hill rumbled and faltered and came down. On the surface of water, the same river Connor had seen before or another one, walked a woman clad in such power that Connor had to control the urge to bow. *So Parvati has at least one Lady among her ancestors.*

There were men, too, busily building and directing and commanding and taking care of children. Connor watched one of them make an ink from a mixture of juices and blood, and set about writing what Connor supposed was the last letter to a woman he had once loved. One of them trailed blood from a wound high on his shoulder, and died, but he had bought his daughter enough time to get away. One stood leaning on the shoulder of a grazing cow, his eyes shut, dreaming the day away, and Connor knew his life had passed in peace and there had been no need for him to rise to heights of courage, though he could have done so if he needed to.

White faces appeared among the dark ones, and Connor watched as the world changed, with Indian wizards and witches retreating farther away from their Muggles, and magic becoming a rumor and then a distant dream. War struck in new ways, new ideas of country arose, trees fell with their branches singing songs of desolation, and Connor would have liked to stay and watch, but a

Patil woman with a young boy in her arms stepped onto a ship and sailed away in the direction of Britain, and the vision, of course, followed them.

He watched as the Patils slid smoothly into the main wake of British wizarding life, accepting the rituals and customs of the country they found themselves in, though in private they would still use the ones of the land they had come from. They had always been part of the Light, and if the Light here was tamer than they had known it, well, that did not matter; it was still the Light. Their children grew up speaking two languages and living in two worlds, and that had always been a matter of pride, a source of strength, rather than something shameful.

Sita Patil rested in a bed with two girls in her arms. Connor focused easily on Parvati, not only because she was the younger, but because the vision drew him to her and pulled him into the center of her blood and bone and breath.

Merlin, she was stubborn. If she needed to do something, she went ahead and did it, and damn the consequences. On the other hand, if she didn't want to do something, she would avoid it and whinge as long as possible—but her conscience could convict her and drag her into doing the right thing, the way that it had with the house elves.

She had pride, and she had vanity, and it wasn't always possible to tell where one ended and the next began. Nor did Parvati truly see a problem with this. So she could not solve the problem with the skills she took pride in? Then she would step away and declare the problem unsolvable, or at least better not solved. Anyone who could solve it might earn a glance of admiration, or a back turned in a huff, depending on how Parvati was feeling at the moment.

She envied Padma. She felt herself dumb, sometimes, because the Sorting Hat hadn't put her in Ravenclaw, and that was where her father had hoped she would end up. On the other hand, she had known she would go into Gryffindor, which the rest of her family had only predicted sometimes, so she had the satisfaction of knowing herself better than anyone in the family did.

She loved like a limpet. Once catching hold, never letting go. Connor basked in that, and grinned when he realized that he could feel a current of Parvati's thought moving through *his* thoughts. She told him to remember that her irritation could be as long-lasting and penetrating as her love.

Connor did not care. He folded himself around her, and then the vision whirled and bore him back.

Connor opened his eyes. He still knelt on the floor in front of Parvati, and when he looked at her, he could see the shadows of her ancestors hovering around her shoulders, as she could doubtless see his. With the circle so open, anyone with a right to stand in it could enter.

But now was the time to close the circle, and make it still welcoming, but primarily for the two of them alone.

"I love you, Parvati," he said steadily. He had never been surer of something in his life. Harry was sure about *vates* things and Draco; well, Connor was sure about this. "And I promise that I am yours, soul and body and mind and heart and magic, never to betray, never to turn aside. What comes on the path, Dark or Light or shadowy, we share it together."

"I love you, Connor," Parvati said, and Connor thought his heart would beat its way out of his chest in his joy and excitement. "The path can turn, but it shall never shake us off. And though we may become angry with each other, or despairing, or weary, there is something larger than ourselves that we swear fealty to with this oath." She leaned forward, a breath from his lips, and whispered, "We share it together."

And then, finally, the circle closed around them with a hiss and a blast of light and a high note of phoenix song, and Connor could *finally* kiss her.

The kiss wasn't all that different from others they'd shared, Connor thought. Her lips were still soft, and the inside of her mouth still tasted nice, and her hair still swept along and tickled his cheeks. But he had wanted to do this, and he had wanted to complete the ceremony, and he felt happy and smug and ready to bounce off the walls, even if the kiss was ordinary.

The ritual blazed around them, and died away at last, but their kiss didn't end until both of them, shared breath or not, needed to take in air. Connor caressed Parvati's cheek as he pulled away from her, and then flexed his hand. It *hurt* from their long joined clasp.

"Who should we tell first?" Connor asked.

“It’s only fair that we tell Harry first,” Parvati said graciously. “We’re in the same house as he is, after all.” Then she grinned. “But *then* we’re telling my parents and Padma. And they can yell for at least ten minutes, all right? And we can both explain to them that they’re not going to change our minds. In fact, given this ritual, it wouldn’t do any good for them to try and make us change our minds.”

Connor snorted. The glee on Parvati’s face was infectious.

He almost hoped that Sita and Rama Patil would suggest that he and Parvati were too young to get married. He almost hoped Draco would sneer and insist that Connor and Parvati were idiots to have chosen a ritual that permanently joined them, not to be parted.

Let them try. Just let them try. The certainty shone inside him, solid and bright as a golden ring. *I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.*

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy-Three: The World Is Green and Gold

“No.”

“But—“

“No.”

The woman in front of Hawthorn leaned back huffily and crossed her arms over her chest.

Hawthorn gave her a patient look to contradict the impatient one. “There is very little that I can do for you,” she said. “I understand why you don’t like being a werewolf—neither did I—but the potion still needs a portion of sacrificed magic to make it work. You were born a Muggle, so you don’t have the magic to give up. I hope that in a few years we’ll have a version of the potion that *can* work without using magic that way, but for right now, we don’t.” She nodded, politely, at the door behind the woman, and started to turn back to the paperwork on her desk. They’d given her an office at the Ministry. Hawthorn had no idea whether that had more to do with her work on the lycanthropy cure or with the fact that, since she was running for Minister, Cupressus seemed to think his organization should welcome her.

“What if I asked someone else to sacrifice his or her magic for me?” The Muggle werewolf had leaned across the desk again, honey-colored hair falling into wide brown eyes as she stared pleadingly at Hawthorn. “Could the potion work if I found someone who would agree?”

“There’s a variation that might work in a few months,” Hawthorn murmured, touching a piece of parchment that concerned exactly that. “For now, though, the magic has to come from the werewolf healed.”

The woman spun and stalked out of her office without another word.

Hawthorn snorted and made a notation on a piece of parchment. The number of Muggle werewolves who had come seeking a cure she couldn’t provide was now nearly twenty. Hawthorn refused to feel bad about it. She empathized with their desperation and their helplessness, none better, but she had provided one miracle in her life. She doubted she would receive two.

From what Potions experts had told her when they studied the cure, Hawthorn had achieved it on the basis of will, inspiration, pure blind luck, and her *ignorance* of the way that most Potions ingredients interacted. She had essentially thrown things together that no one else would have tried, because of the likelihood of their rendering the potion too volatile or stagnant. Apparently, the cure *did* become stagnant at some points in the brewing process, but Hawthorn had simply pressed ahead through that, where other brewers would have stopped and tried to estimate how much they could recover from the mess. And the pauses she’d taken during the process, while she paced and worried about what would happen when she consumed the potion, had turned out to be long enough to add some life to the liquid.

No, she could not expect another combination of luck and grace and intelligence like that to come again.

But that didn’t mean she couldn’t work on improving the potion. And it didn’t mean that she had to spend the rest of her life only doing things involved with lycanthropy cures and werewolf rights, either.

Hawthorn stretched her arms above her head with a little smile, and nearly yawned with her tongue rolling the length of her

mouth, as she had when she was in lupine form. She saw no reason her life should have a bound or a limit. She had survived what the world could throw at her so far. She could survive challenges that she chose to enter of her own free will.

Lucius walked calmly down the hall, his robes flaring behind him. If anyone did come up behind him and were so crass as to be curious about his whereabouts, they would not be able to tell he'd been outside Mrs. Parkinson's office.

He knew they still had a score to settle. It was in the way their gazes crossed like swords at Ministry meetings. So long as the war with the Dark Lord remained the main priority in Britain and Harry needed unity among his allies, they could put their hatreds aside. But when that war ended—

There would be a duel.

Lucius fully intended to make sure he survived it, and if that survival included spying on his opponent to learn her weaknesses, then that was what he would do.

He reached the small office Apollonis had set aside for him—smaller than Hawthorn's, he couldn't help noticing, almost a closet. He took a seat behind the desk and gathered up the paperwork on it. A faint smile touched his face when he noticed that the first piece of parchment was a letter from the American negotiators he'd been writing to.

The small went rather fainter when he read the letter that informed him his share of power in the American Ministry had grown smaller; they'd discovered that Draco, as Harry's joined partner, had the more influence over him and what magical creatures he might come to the United States to free, and they had learned that Draco could invent spells. Apparently, though some of the Ministry officials would keep up good relations with Lucius, they saw more profit in writing to Draco to get what they wanted. The age factor could make his son small in their eyes, but not for very long, especially since Draco was past the age of magical majority.

And something struck Lucius then, something he had not noticed before. He put down the letter and stared thoughtfully at the far wall of his office, after making sure that anyone peering through the door would not be able to tell anything from his face.

He was remembering, now, the way that Narcissa had not interfered when he instructed Draco in the suppression of emotion and the Dark pureblood rituals that it was absolutely essential he go to Hogwarts knowing, but had often taken their son away for a private talk afterwards. He was remembering, now, that Narcissa had got her way in many things that seemed small at the time, from Draco's name—after a constellation, instead of after his Malfoy grandfather, the way that Lucius had wanted to name him—to the fact that he had attended Hogwarts instead of Durmstrang. He was remembering his wife's soft and subtle comments to their son, comments that could build up, over a lifetime, and change the way that someone viewed the world.

Lucius had wondered why his son was not a more perfect copy of himself. He had blamed weaknesses in Draco, for a long time, and he still thought it likely that his son was not made of the pure metal. Then he had blamed Harry, for overwhelming the independence and pride that a Malfoy should have had.

Now, it seemed he should have looked closer to home. And perhaps even encouraged her, since the changes she had sculpted into Draco had insured that he was doing much better in the world than Lucius.

Lucius set the letter aside. For reasons that had nothing to do with what he had just learned, he told himself, he didn't feel like writing to the Americans right now.

It was time to think, and decide how he would speak to Draco when he saw him again, this time consciously not just his son, but Narcissa's.

Harry nodded as he watched the hovering star-shape spray its rays across the door of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. "And you'll remain here to guard the people inside when the first day of spring comes, Miranda?" he asked. There were people in the old Black house now, since Harry felt able to control the forces that might harm them in the wake of his proper inheritance. That made the house a possible target when Voldemort recovered his power, of course, so Harry wanted to be sure that the former house elf understood the importance of protecting it.

"Yes, I will!" The star danced back and forth. "I love the safehouse in the north, but I have learned the people there, and I know all their stories. There are new stories here." She skimmed up and down the front door, and Harry saw small sparks of green and

golden light fly out and sink into the wood. He shivered. He felt them as tickling fingers that stroked up his sides and down his spine. "I will do what I can to protect them, and I will call on you if the attack falls here."

Harry nodded, feeling one of the worries in his mind collapse. Because he could not say where Voldemort might choose to strike first, he was strengthening the defenses at all the safehouses, arranging at least one powerful protector who would both be able to hold his or her own for a time and summon him if danger came knocking.

"Thank you, Miranda," he said, and stretched out his hand so that her light could fall on his skin. He raised an eyebrow when the door opened, since he hadn't heard the sound of footsteps approaching, but understood when Argutus flowed out and came to him, coiling around his leg.

"I have been upstairs and downstairs, and something screaming in the wall hurt my head." Argutus turned himself so that his snout was lying in the hollow of Harry's throat, something he only did when he wanted comfort. *"Can we go home now? I promise to lie on your lap and warm you and be warm. But I do not want to be here with the screaming thing any longer."*

Harry chuckled and stroked the milky-smooth scales. They shone now, with no trace of the dullness that had afflicted them when Argutus showed up at Silver-Mirror in January. "Not yet. We have a few more houses to visit today, and secure against the Snake Lord attacking." He walked out into the blustery March wind, to find a place where he could Apparate in peace, waving farewell to Miranda as he went. The green and golden star bobbed up and down in recognition. Harry felt a great peace well up in him. Here was a house elf who had never known slavery, and who had become what her people were meant to be, again. As soon as the safehouses were secured, Harry would try to free more house elves; if they had known slavery, they could at least know the intoxication of their own proper freedom.

"He is not my Lord," Argutus said. *"I wish you would stop calling him that. If anyone is my Lord, it is you."*

Harry rolled his eyes, and told himself he shouldn't blush over something a snake said to him. It wasn't as though anyone else in the immediate vicinity could understand Argutus, anyway. "It's convenient to call him that in Parseltongue."

"But it's wrong."

Harry shook his head. This was an argument that they'd had for weeks now, and he doubted he would win it. On the other hand, it was fun to argue, or at least it could be when his emotions were free and nothing great was at stake.

"Snake Lord, Snake Lord, Snake Lord," he hissed mockingly while he prepared to jump to Woodhouse, and then lost his breath for the hisses when Argutus squeezed him.

"Remember that I'm a constrictor," Argutus said darkly. *"I don't need any silly venom to make you regret taunting me."*

And then, of course, Harry had to stroke his head and flatter him so that he wouldn't feel unappreciated, and that had to continue after they'd Apparated, too. Not even the promise of a new house to explore could pacify Argutus when he was this irritated.

Snakes had made the seas. Each curling wave was a serpent, and the foam that crashed on the beaches was the poison from their jaws. The humans believed that such foam could not hurt them—they had lost their fear of the sea-serpents—but who knew? Perhaps the venom would grow potent again someday, and then they would scorn themselves for having scorned the danger.

The dreams were near now, were tapestries made of hooks, swelling folds of cloth that leaped and wavered in the breeze of his victim's mind. He no longer had to prevent himself from yanking on them, and revealing his hand too soon. This was *artistry*, and he would no sooner destroy his own artistry than he would forgive Harry his crimes against him and let him go.

His mind raced smoothly among the folds and plunged into another mind he had learned well. He could reach his coiled serpent, the serpent in the breast, even when he was awake now, and whisper the old ambitions into his thoughts, and tug on the tangled threads of dreams and hatred. It was a trick he had used before, but so keen had his patience been this time that no one had noticed the telltale signs. He had *shown* his victims their nightmares, last time. This time, there was no need for that.

And now the time was very near. The first day of spring. The moment when the balance passed from Dark back to Light, and the power suppressing the Lord Voldemort's own magic would vanish.

He had emerged from his regeneration. He had a clean new skin, the coiled serpent, the serpent beneath the earth, the serpent in the sea, who reached out and called to his unwitting willing child, the serpent in the breast.

They all thought he would burst from the earth and attack Harry's precious safehouses. Or they all thought he would create Horcruxes to replace the ones he had lost, as if any wandering Muggle child would do for the murder, any old shoe do for the object that would hold a shard of his soul.

They were fools. They understood *nothing*. The deaths had to be significant, and the objects trophies laden with emotional depth, or what emerged was not a Horcrux. It was worth nothing. That was the way the world worked. Every shadow was full of hidden webs of significance that the Lord Voldemort had long since accepted no one but him saw. At the very least, it made it hard for his enemies to guess what he would do next.

He had already chosen his next Horcrux. He would Transfigure Harry's Omen snake into an enameled statue, and Harry's death would be the one he used to split his soul. But he need not worry about that yet, even if Harry managed the impossible, summoned Evan Rosier, and destroyed the Cup Horcrux.

But the other, the battle.

They were fools, all of them.

Why did he need a final battle, when he had his serpent in the breast, and the third?

The Lord Voldemort would win not because of what Harry would do—Harry always found some way around his most ingenious plans—but because of what Harry would *never* do.

“Leave me alone.”

Well, Honoria didn't intend to do *that*. Ignifer had lain under the blankets, a covered lump, for most of the morning. Honoria had spoken sweetly to her, coaxing her to rouse; she had offered breakfast in bed, which Ignifer still treated as an almost unimaginable luxury; she had offered to summon Tybalt and John through the Floo and let them laugh at her partner, lying around like this. The last had been desperate, admittedly, and not worthy of her, but Honoria had hoped the threat to Ignifer's dignity would get her on her feet.

It hadn't worked. Ignifer still lay with her arms around her head and wailed like a much younger child. Honoria rolled her eyes, and, balancing with some confidence now on her artificial leg, decided that she could resort to a child's tactics in return. She conjured a sharp stick, softly enough that Ignifer didn't hear the incantation, and then poked Ignifer in the side with it.

The blankets flew aside, and Ignifer sat up with a wild look on her face. Honoria stood, with the stick hovering next to her, and blinked at her as if she had no idea what had made Ignifer so angry.

“You're finally up!” she exclaimed, and clapped her hands.

“*Honoria.*”

Ignifer said that in a dangerous tone, but Honoria had become rather used to hearing people say her name that way. Her mother had run out of ways to impress her with it long before Ignifer entered her life. So Honoria cocked her head to the side, widened her eyes, and pursed her mouth in a parody of attention. “Yes?”

“You don't *understand*,” Ignifer said, and ran a hand through the long, bright curls that Honoria found so appealing, and at the moment wished were disheveled for another reason than because Ignifer wouldn't keep her hands out of them. “What is going to *happen* when my father's Minister? I *know* he'll win the election, and I know that this compromising attitude he has right now can't last forever. It's the seventh of March, and the election is set for—what—the seventh of May? That means only two more months of freedom before he starts passing laws against the use of Dark magic, just the way that Juniper did. And he'll probably pass laws against children changing their names, too,” she added darkly.

“No, he won't.” Honoria thought Cupressus Apollonis was a bastard when it came to Ignifer because he *was*, and anyone could see that; it wasn't something open to argument. But she thought Ignifer was wrong about this, and letting her conflicts with her father blind her to the fact that he could want what was best for the wizarding world *and* be irrational when it came to her. “He's given you up for lost, Ignifer. He'll always be far too polite to you, but that doesn't mean he'll hate other Dark wizards just because you Declared Dark. He's been working with them in the rebuilding of the Ministry, you remember.”

“That’s only for right now,” Ignifer muttered. “The minute he has the Minister’s power, he’ll change, mark my words.”

Honorina snorted and sat down on the edge of the bed. “I know what’s wrong,” she announced.

Ignifer regarded her warily between strands of hair.

“You want to reconcile with him,” Honorina said. “And you don’t know how to do it, since you were the one who stamped out. Rather decisively, I might add,” she said, with a faint sigh. The lovemaking from that night was still one of her favorite memories, but Ignifer probably wasn’t up to a repetition right now, since Honorina had to enlighten her as to her true motives. “But you could *admit* that, Ignifer, and I could help you figure out a way to reconcile with him. It’s not the end of the world, you know, even though you changed your name and refuse to change your Declaration. You can overcome even his irrationality and his stubbornness. I managed to overcome yours, didn’t I, when I first took you for my lover?”

Ignifer’s mouth fell open.

Honorina patted her hand. “You don’t have to tell me how brilliant I am,” she said, a bit condescendingly. Really, she could do with accolades for her brilliance, but even if Ignifer offered them right now, they wouldn’t be sincere, so Honorina thought she might as well wait to demand them. “I understand you better than anyone else does, Ignifer, even yourself. And I promise that I’ll do the best I can to put you and your father into a room and get you to cooperate.” The more she thought of this impossible goal, the more her interest kindled. Pranks would *have* to be involved. And illusions. She felt the glimmers of the lions gyrate above her shoulders as she thought of it. “It might take years, but you’ll have him back again, and he’ll see that he has a daughter to be proud of, not to scorn.”

“I don’t want to *reconcile* with him,” Ignifer spluttered. “I’m just afraid of what’s going to happen when he becomes Minister, that’s all!”

Honorina patted her hand again. “Of course you don’t want that, dear.” *Stubborn to the bone, both of them. It’s no wonder they’re so miserable apart. They need each other to take out their spleen on.*

“Listen to me carefully, Honorina.” Ignifer had leaned forward and gripped her hands, staring into her face. “I do not *want* reconciliation with my father. I’m just worried about what will happen when he’s in the position to bring down that peculiar idea of ‘justice’ he has on the whole world.”

“Bah,” said Honorina.

And then she had to duck, because Ignifer seemed intent on calling enough fire to char her to a crisp. Honorina grinned as she changed into her Animagus form, her smile sharp enough to cut.

No, it may not be true yet, but I can make it true. And at least she’s not hiding beneath the blankets any more.

Cupressus gave a small shrug. He could not understand why the people around him demanded certainty, when the election hadn’t happened yet and wasn’t intended to happen for another few months. “It is likely that I will win the election,” he said. “Until I do, I cannot promise you an appointment.”

Periwinkle closed her eyes and fought for patience. Cupressus could see that, because he’d known her for years. He wondered what she had expected when she came to see him. She was of one of the Irish Light families who had followed him for decades, and then changed her allegiance to Harry and freed her house elves for money. Had she expected him to simply give her a position when she came questing around, sniffing around? What part of loyalty was alien to her?

“I understand that you may be unable to say yet,” she said, finally forcing her eyes open. “But you could *hint*—“

“I have no need to hint,” Cupressus said, and held her gaze. “I do what I must do first for the survival of the Light, and secondarily of the alliance, and thirdly of the new Ministry, and fourth of my line. I see no place for hinting in any of that, madam. If anything, I must be honest, because there are too many parties around me who would take innuendo as a sign that I have betrayed one or another of my duties.”

Periwinkle rose to her feet, trembling. “You will regret the day when you turned me away, Cupressus Apollonis,” she hissed.

“I doubt that very much.” Cupressus watched her in puzzlement that he took care to keep hidden. Why did she think such tactics

would convince him? What had he done to her, that she thought taking revenge in this way would work?

“I can keep votes of the Light from you.” Periwinkle’s face was triumphant.

“Then I may not win,” said Cupressus. *Ah. That is what she thinks I want. She thinks I am so involved in the politics of it all as to care for my own power. But I am here because I think I can serve the Light here. If the people of the British wizarding world do not want me here, I will go home and serve the Light from there. She thinks she can threaten me because I have something to lose.*

But the service of the Light is not something one can lose save by one’s own actions.

After a long staring contest, Periwinkle whirled and strode from the room. Cupressus shook his head. *There goes one who has forsaken her allegiance in her heart, and begun to hunger after power.*

His Floo connection flared. Cupressus turned. There were only a small number of houses he permitted to reach him directly, without going through one of the lower offices, and he knew Harry was still involved in securing the safehouses, as best he could, against an attack by Voldemort.

The face of the woman he supposed he must call his daughter-in-law, because it was the most convenient way to refer to her, appeared in the green flames. Cupressus inclined his head. “Miss Pemberley.”

“There are two of us now, you know,” Honoria told him smartly.

“No,” said Cupressus, wondering that she did not know the usage. “She is Mrs. Pemberley, because she joined into the family, and you are Miss. What can I do for you, Miss Pemberley?”

Honoria only smiled as if he were amusing. To someone who was incapable of taking life seriously, Cupressus supposed, he might be. “I came to talk to you about reconciling with your daughter.”

Cupressus blinked, caught out for a moment. Then he raised his eyebrows. “Has she renounced her Declaration to the Dark?”

“No.”

“Has she said that she wants to reconcile with me, or that she will forgive me for the infertility curse I cast upon her?”

“No.”

“Then I cannot see that we have anything to say to one another.” Cupressus drew his cloak around his shoulders and gave a faint shrug. “A reconciliation between us will not work without those things, Miss Pemberley.”

“You think so,” said Honoria. “But I am determined to make it work, and I think you know how strong my determination can be, Mr. Apollonis.”

She closed the Floo connection before he could say anything more, and left Cupressus regarding the hearth thoughtfully.

The partner Ignifer had chosen for herself was very far from the one he would have chosen for her: female, and therefore unable to give her children; Dark; half-blood; of a family so minor that its son had almost not spoiled himself by marrying a Muggle.

But she was forceful. Cupressus could grant her that. And if she did manage to reconcile them, then he would be forced to grant her a measure of respect, as well.

He put it out of his mind as he strode from the building. He would not resist the reconciliation if it happened, as long as at least some of his own wishes were respected.

What happens, happens, and all is the will of the Light.

Owen took a deep breath and pushed his hair back behind his ears. Shoulder-length, he noted absently. He should really cut it, or perhaps just trim the ends a bit. Shoulder-length hair on a head of family was appropriate.

He was surprised to find out how much he *enjoyed* politics.

Yes, he had enjoyed being near Harry, guarding him and fulfilling the duties of a sworn companion, too, but that had been a different kind of enjoyment. He had been serene then, knowing exactly what he needed to do and how to do it. It was the pleasure of competence, of trained muscles and magic doing what he told them to do.

Here, in the Ministry, serving as liaison with the Dark families and their representative to Light wizards like Cupressus Apollonis, his mind had to work harder than ever, flinging itself through myriad wheels, like a Crup trained to perform in a circus. And still there were always demands pressing against him that he hadn't thought about, and ruffled tempers to soothe, and laughter that followed him and might or might not be directed at him. This was like dancing across broken glass and eggshells, with the knowledge that a shard could pierce his foot at any time.

It was *wonderful*.

And here came one of the women he needed to see now. Owen patted his robe pocket and stood.

"Miss Nonpareil, ma'am!" he called, and watched her turn around in surprise. Faustine Nonpareil wasn't used to people calling for *her* instead of Elizabeth, her older cousin, who was the head of the family and the one most people paid attention to, since she had all the money and all the prestige. But, of course, Elizabeth had no *sense*, and while to most Dark wizards that just made her more convenient, since she couldn't challenge their dominance over her, Owen was determined that *no* one who was Dark and running for Minister would look like an idiot. Not even if she really, really wanted to. And that would have to include Elizabeth.

"Yes, Mr. Rosier-Henlin?" Faustine asked. "What can I do for you?" Like her cousin, she wore black and silver, but the silver was weaker on her, the black more severe. Owen liked the effect. She shone like a comet when she walked the halls of the Ministry, and her family had been sending her to walk them more and more often, since she was one of the few immediate relatives who could manage Elizabeth. Her hair was dark, her eyes were dark, and her complexion was dark, though Owen couldn't immediately tell if her heritage was Indian, Egyptian, or something else. "Has Elizabeth made another mistake?" The grimace at the mention of her cousin was so fleeting that one would have to concentrate to know how she felt.

"Not as such," said Owen, and held out his hand. Faustine looked at it, but didn't clasp it. "I wanted to know if you would be amenable to doing something that would improve the reputation of the Nonpareil family, or at least hold it steady through this election. I do not want to see Elizabeth making such a fool of herself as to stain the rest of you."

Faustine's eyebrows rose. "And why would the fate of another family matter to you so much, Mr. Rosier-Henlin?"

Owen kept his hand out. "Because I've been watching Light wizards, Miss Nonpareil."

"Really."

"Yes." Owen shifted so that the books under his other arm were more firmly balanced, and, hopefully, so that his arm wouldn't start to tremble with weariness. "They cooperate to protect their allegiance, the best of them, to insure that Light children will grow up with the chances that come with being Light. I think we should do the same, those of us who can, to protect the Dark."

I didn't judge her wrong, Owen thought as her eyes fired. *Yes, she's interested, and she can look beyond herself, and even the end of her family's interests*. It was the rare Dark wizard or witch who could, even now. They simply weren't trained to it the way the Light ones were.

"That sounds *very* interesting, Mr. Rosier-Henlin," Faustine said, and this time she took his hand, letting her fingers slip along his palm. "In more ways than one."

Owen felt his brow flex, and then he smiled. Well, why not? A bit of flirting never hurt anyone, and it might make things more interesting.

"I have an office where we can talk, Miss Nonpareil," he said.

She gave him a smile as deep and dangerous as a well of still water. "Please, Owen," she murmured. "Call me Faustine."

Syrinx wondered sometimes if anyone had noticed. She didn't think they had.

When Laura had sent her to Harry, it had been because Syrinx was entering the phase of her war witch training where she would need to find an anchor—the person who kept her sane, who inspired her, who was her example—and she had chosen Harry. A few of her relatives had argued against the choice, saying Harry was likely to die any day, and did Syrinx really want to be left in the shattered sanity that would follow if her anchor perished? Look what had happened to Augustus Starrise when his sister died.

But Syrinx had been sure. One couldn't argue with a war witch, or perhaps one couldn't argue with a determined Gloryflower woman, and so at last they had given in, muttering, and Laura had sent her to serve Harry as a sworn companion. She had been one of three, and then two, and then four. It was rather interesting, watching how the patterns swarmed and how they changed.

But more interesting than that was watching Harry, and gathering her feet under her, and becoming a war witch, and making him her anchor.

He was a good anchor, Syrinx knew. Others might see him as undeclared; in fact, they let the idea of his Declaration rule them to the extent that they could not see what he *did*, what magic he actually used, or what he believed. But she had watched him in quiet moments when no one else was about to observe, and in the midst of battle, and she saw the Light that underlay his morals, shining and singing like a flute buried long ago but enchanted to play when someone brought it into the sunlight again.

The Light understood free will, and Harry embodied it.

The Light valued cooperation, and Harry built alliances.

The Light knew peace, and that was what Harry longed for.

The Light loved honesty, and Harry stuck to that where he could, even when it damaged him.

The Light enacted restrictions, and so did Harry, holding back his power when he could easily have used it, limiting himself *voluntarily*. The Dark wizards around him had the most trouble understanding that, Syrinx knew. Why wouldn't you exercise all the power you could, claim all you might, take all you wanted for yourself?

They did not ask the question that was the complement of that: Why *would* you?

So he was her anchor, and she walked with him in the guise of an emotionless servant, the war witch in this phase of her training, while under the surface lay a wonderful sunlit world that only she was aware of. The sunlit world stretched, and blossomed, and she learned much that even her older relatives did not know, because Gloryflowers rarely ventured out to meet Dark wizards, and rarely battled beside them when they did.

So no one had noticed her sculpting herself into what she had wanted to become, but that did not matter. Now she had completed the sculpting, and left this phase of her training, and she could press forward into the next.

Syrinx lifted her head and *became*.

“But you can't just do that,” Padma argued.

Parvati felt a great peace. “We can,” she said. “We could. We did.” She had decided, after all, to tell her twin the great news of her marriage first, in private. There would be time for shouting and tears from Rama and Sita later. But she wanted to hear what Padma had to say separately from what their parents would say. “We're married, Padma, and it's one of those bonds that will not let you leave it. So I'm bound to Connor for all this lifetime, and probably in the next as well.”

“That's *stupid*,” Padma pointed out. “What happens if one of you dies?”

Parvati shrugged. “Well, we can actually get married again, if we wish, but not with the same ritual, or another as binding. And I could always have lovers. Or he could have lovers,” she had to add, though she didn't like to think about it. “But that's the kind of thing that we chose to accept when we chose this ritual, Padma. Believe me, I took a long time to think about it.” An unconscionably long time, it seemed to her now, since their wedding had turned out so well. “And now we're married, and no one can separate us. Even if we weren't of legal age, this binding would take precedence over any claim of family, you know.”

Padma scowled at her, and muttered something Parvati couldn't believe she'd heard. “What?” she whispered.

“I said,” Padma repeated, “that I would have liked to be invited to attend my twin sister's wedding.”

And then Parvati felt as if clean air were pouring in on her, because Padma wasn't angry with her, not at all, and she understood the reasons that Parvati had wanted to marry Connor like this, and even with one circle of her soul closed so that she only shared it with Connor, they were still sisters.

Parvati extended her hand through the Floo connection, and Padma grasped it back. They knelt there on either side of the flames for a moment, not mirror images of twin girls, but something better than that.

Then Parvati pulled her hand back, and asked, "Do you want to be in the same room when I tell Mum and Dad?"

"Of course," said Padma, and her small, vicious smile made Parvati expect that she'd enjoy the yelling from both sides. *Well, she can enjoy it. I would never deprive my sister of that.*

"Potter! Wait up."

Connor turned around, his eyebrows raised in polite inquiry, but his inner child snickering. He'd expected Draco to pounce on him much earlier in the day, actually. People around the kitchen table, when he'd first seemed to notice the remnants of the ritual hanging about Connor and Parvati, had probably kept him from it, though. "Malfoy," Connor said, returning last name for last name. "What's the matter? I believe Harry's still out at the safehouses, since it *is* only ten days until Voldemort attacks, after all —"

"What ritual did you perform?" Draco scratched his nose, and then scratched the centers of his palms, as if he had to convince Connor that he really did itch all over. "It's been driving me *mad*."

"Oh, that." Connor gave a little shrug, making sure that it was casual. "Parvati and I joined in a marriage ritual a few days ago. We talked to Harry about it afterwards, and he gave us his blessing. I didn't mention it to you because you've been busy with those new spells for the Ministry and I didn't think you'd really care about such things, but—"

"You did *not* get married, Potter." Draco's cheeks were flaming patches of color in a very pale face.

"Yes, we did," Connor said, controlling his intense enjoyment. He had known this would shock Draco, and that had been one of the first pleasant side-effects he'd thought of when he first discovered the ritual in a book. "Oh, granted, it wasn't an enormous ceremony like some couples have. Or a three-year-dance," he added, because he couldn't help himself. "But that doesn't mean it isn't legitimate. It's based on a justice ritual. It would have separated us, violently, if one of us was unwilling, or if we had agreed at first and then backed out halfway through the binding."

"But you can't be *married*," Draco repeated. "It's impossible. You're still impossibly childish, and you know it."

Connor clapped him on the shoulder. "I suppose that I should take your word for it, of course, mate," he said. "The ritual must have been a mirage, and Parvati must have shared the same dream, since she's walking around thinking we're married, and even mentioned it to her sister and her parents. At least they'll be relieved, though. They were awfully angry we married."

Draco jerked away from him. "Why did you do this?" he hissed.

"I think the better question, Malfoy, would be why do you care so much?" And Connor turned his back and left him there, spluttering, because of course Malfoy didn't care so much about the marriage itself as the fact that something had happened which he couldn't predict.

Connor slowed when he passed Michael standing at a window, staring out into the sky, tears streaming down his cheeks. The temptation to pass on was great, but—well, he was Michael's friend, in a way, if only because no one else would be, so that made it his duty to ask after things like this.

"Michael?" he murmured. Perhaps the other boy wouldn't hear him, and then Connor could creep on.

Michael whirled around and caught Connor in an embrace. Connor blinked and stood still, wondering what had happened. Luckily, Michael told him immediately, instead of demanding that he guess.

"Connor," he said. "I got—I got a letter from my brother. From the Ministry. He's thinking about me! He even gave me a Portkey so that I can visit him whenever I want." He held up a pebble, and his smile was wide enough to stretch the burn on the side of his

face. “He’s *thinking* about me,” he whispered.

Connor patted him gently on the shoulder and then detached from him. “I’m glad, Michael,” he whispered. “So glad. If anyone deserves to have the notice of his older brother more often, it’s you.” He remembered when he would have given a Quidditch victory to have Harry pay attention to him.

Michael smiled at him, and bounced off. Connor stood where he was for a moment, feeling a silly grin widen across his face.

The world was full of light.

Thomas sat back and stared at the book expectantly. It looked thick enough, having a wooden cover and creamy parchment pages. The gold lettering on the front proclaimed what it was, *A Record of Common Sense and Morality*.

He picked it up and hit himself over the head with it.

The stunning impact traveled down through his skull, and Thomas dropped his forehead to the table, gasping. It *hurt*, but the pain was only a distraction, really. He was much more interested in seeing if the knowledge he’d imparted into the book, of moral precepts he’d only read a few times, would brighten and glow inside his mind.

And—

Yes! It was happening! Thomas would have danced if it weren’t for his pounding headache and the book crushing his hand and the fact that the knowledge probably still needed time to trickle down and really settle into his mind. It didn’t yet work as *well* as he would like, since the words were just silent, as if someone had read the book to him once, and not repeating themselves in his head, but he could improve it.

And then, there would be no excuse for anyone anywhere in the *world* to be stupid.

Thomas smiled. The world was full of light.

“Thank you, Neville.” Henrietta smiled up at the Longbottom boy as she crouched over the vines he had helped her pot and settle when they arrived from the Yaxley garden. “I could never have done this without you.”

Longbottom nodded and wiped his forehead with the back of one hand, leaving a long streak of sweat in the dirt. “They were tricky ones to settle, Professor,” he said. He still called her that, though the chances that Henrietta would ever teach at the rebuilt Hogwarts were nonexistent. “I’m glad that you called on me. I’d hate to have seen them die.” He eyed the dark green vines with silver markings down the middle as if they would die now just to spite him.

Henrietta nodded back. “And you won’t tell anyone about them, of course, will you, Neville?”

At once his face paled, and he all but stumbled away from her, swallowing at the same time as he tried to speak, so that the result was rather muffled. But Henrietta still made out the, “Of c-course not, Professor.”

Satisfied, she turned back to the pots as Neville ran away, and stroked a finger down the middle of a vine. It curled around her finger and tried to hold tight, but Henrietta eased her hand gently away. She’d tried the vines on herself, of course, and they had worked to perfection. It would be considerably harder to use them on Harry, but she had twenty-five pots here, and the vines still had some time to grow before the equinox arrived.

She could not wait.

Harry really should have paid more attention to the fifth stanza of the fourth prophecy.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy-Four: The First Day of Spring

Harry rubbed the sweat off his hands onto his robes. He had just reached the calm, balanced state of mind necessary to cast the

summoning spell that he'd found in the old book in the library, when—

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Draco muttered.

His concentration thrown *yet again*, Harry turned around and hissed, “Of course I'm sure! Will you *shut up* for a while?”

Draco folded his arms across his chest and looked sulky. Harry took a deep breath and turned back to the rune circle in front of him. He'd created it with Henrietta's help—she knew something about rune circles—and Draco's—he knew something about them, too, when he wasn't getting stuck in them—and Argutus's—he could reflect the runes in his scales and tell Harry if they were right or wrong. Argutus currently clung around his neck, watching the circle, and Draco sat at his right shoulder. Henrietta had said she had other things to work on, but had promised to come at once to Harry's call if the summoning spell actually worked.

Harry saw no reason why it wouldn't. He'd worked Evan Rosier's name into the runes in every imaginable permutation. He could visualize the man far more clearly than he liked, with his heavy stare and mad, laughing dark eyes. He had even put blueberry pies around the outer rim of the circle, following the advice of the book that said he should try to make it worth the summoned person's while to show up.

But this was still powerful magic, Dark—because it trod the line between free will and compulsion—and dangerous. Harry would have to be extremely careful not to tip over that line and actually *command* Rosier to appear, or he could lose his position as *vates*. It would be more like a combination of manipulation and persuasion, at least once he made contact with Rosier's mind. Thus the blueberry pies; those in themselves might be enough to tempt the madman.

And then you must hope that he has the Hufflepuff Cup with him, and you must find someone who will agree to be the sacrifice.

That last was the part Harry resolutely avoided thinking about. He locked his gaze on the rune circle again and summoned walls of calm to rise in his head, cutting him off from those sights and sounds he didn't need to absorb. That included Draco's breathing and the rustling of his robes. He didn't like the summoning spell, didn't think that Harry should be even partially alone while calling Rosier, and didn't like the fact that Snape and others were poised behind doors to break into the room if he should succeed. Harry had explained that he couldn't concentrate if they actually were present in the room, but Draco had not wanted to listen. That had been the cause of another yelling session last night, and was probably part of the reason that Harry had so much trouble settling his mind now.

Of course you will, if you think of everything but the summoning itself, Harry's thoughts said sharply, and slapped him back into position over the incantation he'd memorized.

“*Cito Evan Rosier!*” he said, the words welling up from inside him at nearly a shout. There were other summoning spells he could have used, including ones that were variants on the *Accio*, but this spell left more free will for its victim. The Latin phrasing implied that Harry was calling on Rosier as an expert in his chosen field.

Yes, in a way, it was deception. But so long as Rosier still had the option to refuse the call, Harry was leaving open a loophole. It was not something he would have risked three years ago.

You would not have risked many things three years ago. Now, for Merlin's sake, shut up and repeat the incantation. It's been three heartbeats.

“*Cito Evan Rosier!*” The words tore themselves from Harry this time, the spell doing what it needed to exist. A thin tracing of green light glowed above the runes of the circle, and Harry tried not to think about how much it reminded him of the light of the Killing Curse. Then it dived into the runes, and Harry could feel it running over the reconfigured letters of Rosier's name like fingers running down his own spine. He shivered convulsively, but kept kneeling there, counting his heartbeats until the moment came to repeat the chant. The spell took the time to learn that name beyond the point of turning back or mistaking it.

“*Cito Evan Rosier!*”

The green light spun up above the rune circle, twisted and twirled there like a noose, and then shot out, fading as it hit the wall. Harry could see rushed, blurred buildings and forests and pools and gardens passing by. He guessed those were the representations of other minds, what a Legilimens would see looking through someone's eyes. But the spell was not interested in them; it reached, always and only, for the one that would say *Evan Rosier*.

“*Cito Evan Rosier!*”

Harry wasn't sure that fourth cry was him; the instructions for the spell had only said it would happen, not who would say it. The spell could have been speaking for itself. They were very close now, he knew. The summons cut through the air between them, and firmed. It would not drag Rosier in, like the more powerful summoning spells would have, but it would let him know his presence was desired, and present him with the choice to answer the call or not.

Harry braced himself. He was almost sure that Rosier would choose to answer the call, if only because he'd like the chance to hurt Harry. That was the reason for the rest of the rune circle, and Argutus's and Draco's presence there as well as Harry's own. Rosier's sanity and magic could do unpredictable things. Yes, it was unlikely he would manage to break the ring, but Harry no longer took risks with his own life when he didn't have to.

The summons snapped taut. Harry clenched his fists. The book had described that happening when the spell had hold of the prey it wanted to find. It still would not compel him to come, but it would stay there, unable to be ignored, until Rosier chose one way or the other.

And then the spell collapsed. Harry yelped in pain as an invisible fire scorched his hands, and had to grab hold of his knees, hard, to keep from tipping forward into the rune circle. Draco was at his side in a moment, snatching his shoulder. Harry looked back to meet a pair of eyes that was similarly wide.

"What happened?" Draco demanded.

The answer sounded in Harry's head before he could respond, an ageless, sexless voice that simply said, *Evan Rosier as you understand him no longer exists.*

Harry hissed as the release of magical energy backlashed into him. The runes of the circle went flying away from each other, bouncing like disturbed scree from the walls and the floors. Argutus whinged about pieces hitting his scales, but Harry's mind was on the spell's message.

"The spell failed because we tried to target the wrong mind, apparently," he said. "*Evan Rosier as you understand him no longer exists.*"

"What does *that* mean?"

Harry shook his head, but his mind was on the small smile Henrietta had given him when Harry came to her and asked her to help him with the rune circle, since she understood both rune magic and Evan Rosier the best of them all. "I don't know, but I'm going to ask Henrietta."

"We failed to snare him," Draco pointed out unnecessarily.

"We couldn't have sped up either finding the spell or constructing it." Harry whirled the runes into the air with his magic, wary of touching them by hand. They could still shimmer with sparks of power he wasn't ready to absorb yet. Though he wouldn't show it to Draco, because he did not want Draco to be smug at him over not being ready, that backlash of magic had *hurt*.

"Tomorrow is the first day of spring."

"I know."

"Voldemort will be moving—"

"*I know, Draco, I know!*" Harry spun around, and the magic around him billowed and rippled like disturbed curtains. "*I know* that, all right? *I understand* that. That doesn't mean there's anything I can do about it. We did the best we could to retrieve the final Horcrux before he attacked again, using a plan that took a long time because it was a *good* one. We failed. Now we'll just need to hold off his attacks as long as we can tomorrow, and then track Rosier down and destroy that Horcrux. And then we can kill him." He clapped his hands together, sending out a blast of blue wind, because that would be better than the things he *wanted* to do to Draco just then. "You act as though I don't know the requirements of defeating Voldemort. I do. *All* of them."

Draco's face was tight in a way that said they would be sleeping in separate beds that night. Harry didn't care. He stomped away up the stairs with Argutus, and tried to convince himself that his network of defenses in place, behind powerful protectors who would contact him the moment they sensed Voldemort moving to the attack, was a good one. He had done everything he could to shelter those who didn't want to flee Britain. The rebuilt Ministry and the rebuilt Hogwarts were under close guard, along with all the safehouses.

He had done what he could. He could not anticipate every move that Voldemort or, as it turned out, Evan Rosier would make. He would do everything he could think of, and if Draco had any better suggestions, maybe he should *offer* them instead of keeping them behind a smug smirk.

The call came at noon.

Harry looked up from lunch—he'd finally decided to eat something after a frustrating conversation with Henrietta, in which he talked and she smiled at him and stroked the sides of her teacup and said nothing—to see a flare of golden-green light above him. He rose, his heart beating hard. That was Miranda's signal.

When he raised a hand and invoked the connection to Silver-Mirror that he had as Black heir, everyone in the house heard him. The doorknobs and the walls, the floors and the chairs, spoke with his voice.

"Voldemort is attacking Grimmauld Place," he said. "Miranda is there, and house elf magic will hold him off for a short time, but we must go. Everyone who wishes to join me, meet me in the kitchen in no less than three minutes." He dropped his hand, and the walls and furniture went back to being no more than silent mirrors.

He felt little to no *fear* as he waited. He knew that he would see Voldemort again, and not kill him today, because they did not have the last Horcrux in their possession. But, at the same time, he thought he was prepared to do battle. He'd drain Voldemort for all he was worth the moment he saw him. No talking him out of anything, no letting him capture Draco, no slowing down to listen to his taunts. Harry just wanted his magic, which Voldemort would fight to protect, and he would grab that and drag on it until nothing was left.

Footsteps pounded down the stairs, and Draco ran in, his hair looking windblown. Snape followed him, and Henrietta, and Ginny, Thomas, and nearly everyone else in the house, it looked like, though Harry didn't see his brother, nor his sister-in-law. He wasn't surprised. From the sounds, Connor and Parvati had been up rather late the night before, for purposes that had nothing to do with fighting Voldemort.

"Did you think you could leave me behind?" Draco muttered, shouldering his way to Harry's side.

Harry stared coldly at him. "I said nothing about leaving you *behind*," he pointed out. "As long as you could make it into the kitchen in three minutes, then you were welcome."

"But you would have left me behind if I didn't."

"Just like everyone *else*."

"I'm not everyone else."

Harry opened his mouth to shout, and became aware that the people around them were watching them with varying degrees of disgust and amusement. He shut his mouth, instead, and cleared his throat. "We're going to Grimmauld Place," he said. "Everyone who hasn't seen the house often enough to visualize it, grab onto someone else's arm." He watched approvingly as Ginny latched on to Thomas, and Henrietta to Snape, who looked repulsed. "Come."

And they Apparated.

The burrow was filled with laughter, echoing and diving and darting across the walls.

Harry had fallen for his trap. There was no need for blood and battle, not when the Lord Voldemort carried the advantages he did, the advantages that had lain slumbering in the darkness for more than a decade, the advantage that began here, where it all began, and would end here, where Harry would end.

His magic joined the laughter, whirling blade-like around the walls, humping and traveling in waves like an obsidian serpent. Strong he was, and mighty, mighty, mighty. Power enough to shake the oceans respired in one breath. His magic roared and rose and clawed at the air like a dragon.

And *this* was the power that Harry thought to stand as heir of? This was what he imagined he could both take from the Lord

Voldemort and control? It was not enough. Not even the inheritance process, which favored the boy because magic flowed naturally from magical ancestor to magical heir, would be enough to give him strength here. The power was too great, a wave of darkness, blowing away from him and then slamming back into his body when he willed.

There would be no final battle, because the Lord Voldemort would use Harry against himself, would use the traits he would never betray against the ones he would. There were things that mattered to Harry more than the war.

What would Harry *never* do?

The walls of earth that Falco had carved for him shook like dolphins leaping at sea. And the Lord Voldemort calmed his magic, because he did not mean to collapse his home yet. It had to endure, because he had carved torture chambers he meant to use.

He sent out the call, tugged on the tangled fabric of hatred and need and power embedded in his serpent's mind. The serpent stirred, sluggishly, and then began to do what he was told.

The third, the third, the third!

Harry arrived at Grimmauld Place, and tasted the familiar violent, acrid tang of Voldemort's magic in the air. He charged forward at once, hearing Draco yell for him to stop, and not caring. If they got there in time, then they could back him up. But what he needed right now was to drain Voldemort's magic; he was the only one who could do that, and there it was right in front of him, thick as dark treacle.

His blood was up, his anger free from its long prison around his deadliest enemy for the first time. There was no way that he could have refused the call.

Miranda was dancing in front of the door to Grimmauld Place, still denying the bastard entrance. The wards parted for Harry, of course, and Voldemort, a blurred figure in the midst of magic like heaving smoke, as if he hadn't wanted the Muggles who lived on either side of the house to stare at him, turned away from the house elf magic to face Harry. Red eyes shone from the smoke like fires of lava burning far down in a volcano's throat.

Harry smiled, and opened his *absorbere* gift.

Voldemort was doing the same, but he was *just* a bit slow. Harry's gift was open first, and he didn't bother drawing on the smoke and the magic that Voldemort had draped around himself for show, tempting though it was. He pulled at the red eyes instead, and they went out. His enemy shrieked—in confusion and pain and anger, Harry knew, not fear.

That will be remedied.

He drank and ate, crushing up the magic as it passed down his throat, the sides of the gullet bracing and flexing as he swallowed. This was easier than it had once been. Distantly, Harry wondered if that came from his growing familiarity with Voldemort's magic, or from the fact that this time, he was actually determined to take the power away, having no lingering distaste or distrust about his ability to swallow magic.

Not everything set free from the prison within him when he drained his Occlumency pools was positive, a stray thought informed him.

Harry ignored it, and concentrated on draining the magic. It was almost sweet, now, in the way that even the foulest-tasting potion could become sweet when one knew it would soothe the pain from a broken limb. He could feel Draco at his back, a steady presence, and just knowing he was there sent Harry to new heights of determination. He couldn't back down, because Draco was there and he had to protect him, and because he would show Draco that he'd been ready for this battle. No, they hadn't destroyed the last Horcrux yet, but if Harry could weaken Voldemort sufficiently, as he had managed to do in the Chamber of Secrets after he tormented Snape, then he could leave him lying helpless for enough time to secure and destroy the Cup. And this time, there was no Indigena Yaxley to spare her Lord.

He heard Draco yell a curse, and a line of red light glowed and flew over Harry's shoulder to strike at Voldemort.

And went straight through him.

Harry didn't stop swallowing the magic, because by this point he couldn't, but he was startled, and he increased his efforts to

mash the food. *What happened? Did he actually manage to step aside from the spell, even though he's blind?*

Another spark of unease struck him just then. *For that matter, why isn't he trying to drain me back? Why isn't he taunting me? Is he just in too much pain? But I've never known him to be in that much pain—*

Harry hit the limit of the magic he could swallow just then, and had to close his gift and concentrate on incorporating the power into himself. He could feel it squirming within him, evil and determined to twist him for its own ends, but Harry had had experience taming Parseltongue magic and Voldemort's power and Dumbledore's by now. He bore down, and the darkness went away, flowing smoothly into him. It still resented him, but as time passed, it would become indistinguishable from the other magic that Harry used.

And the smoke dissipated.

Harry roared with rage as he realized what the smoke and the red eyes and the magic he had drained had been. *A glamour. A sending. He made a construct of himself, powerful enough to fool me and Miranda into thinking this was the real thing, and sent it here to attack.*

Then where is the real attack? And why would he give up part of his magic like that? He doesn't do sacrifices. What in the world could he gain, what attack on what other safehouse, could he make that would cause him to give up enough of his magic to make this deception convincing?

And then Harry knew, as if someone had slung the answer like a stone into his skull, or Thomas had written a book proclaiming the knowledge.

To get me away from Silver-Mirror.

Harry swung around and Apparated.

Connor yawned and pushed his hair out of his eyes. He felt extraordinarily sleep-mused and even now, knowing that he'd missed his brother's summons to battle because he'd been slumbering too deeply, more than satisfied. He chewed a piece of toast, thought about what he and Parvati had done last night, and grinned. He wondered if Harry had thought of intruding to pay him back for all those times Connor had broken in on him and Draco.

I'm lucky that I have a brother more understanding than I am. He licked crumbs from his fingers.

A footstep echoed behind him, and Connor turned, surprised that Parvati was already done with her shower. But then he realized it was only Michael edging into the kitchen, and he grinned and waved him over. Michael refused to take a seat, though, fidgeting nervously, eyes downcast.

"Do you think I'm a coward because I didn't go to battle with them this morning?" he whispered, so softly that Connor could hardly make it out.

Connor frowned, surprised by the illogic. He'd thought they'd got beyond this. "Why would I, Michael? After all, I'm here myself. It was a matter of how fast we could get to the kitchen when Harry called us, not cowardice or bravery." He considered. *Should I have marmalade or butter on my final piece of toast? It's so hard to decide. Or I could go up and surprise Parvati in the shower.*

"I'm glad," Michael said, his voice barely above a breath. "I'm glad that you think that of me. You've been a friend to me, Connor, even when I haven't deserved one." His head drooped, and he stared at the kitchen table as if it were the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

Concerned, Connor stood and went over to him. "Come, now," he said, putting a hand on Michael's shoulder. "If you don't have confidence in yourself, how can you expect your brother or Harry or Draco to do so? No one likes talking to someone who mopes around feeling sorry for himself no matter the cause."

Michael took a deep breath and looked up at Connor, with a slight nod. "I suppose you're right," he said. "At any rate, you've had more confidence in me than I merited. Thank you." His face widened into a gentle, melancholy smile. "*Portus.*"

The whirl of a Portkey grabbed Connor, long before he had time to stagger back from Michael. The only slight comfort he had

was that Michael came along with him. The much bigger discomfort was that they were going somewhere unknown, and Connor had left his wand on the table beside his bed.

His mind worked frantically, dragging up a memory he couldn't have recalled at any ordinary time. *He said that he got a Portkey from Owen. Maybe he wanted to take me to visit his brother this morning, or negotiate between them, and he just didn't know how to ask. He's not very good at asking for anything.*

And then they landed in darkness, and Connor knew it wasn't the Ministry.

He tried to lunge upwards, soft earth stirring beneath his feet, but magic grabbed him and slammed him to the ground. Connor barely got a breath before he was frozen, his head held back at an awkward angle, so that he could see both Michael, staring at the Portkey in his hand, and the white shape, far too familiar from nightmares and battles, stalking towards him.

Connor drew in his breath to scream at Michael to run, and then Michael turned his head, and Connor saw his triumphant eyes, and the hand-shaped burn on his face he'd received in the fall of Hogwarts, and felt the scream die in his throat.

He was marked by Voldemort. He hates Harry. That kind of hatred and a mark that Voldemort inflicted himself can be used to control someone, the way that he controlled Snape, the way he tried to control Harry.

Shit. Oh, shit.

The words seemed to fall into a deep well inside Connor, pebbles that set up no echo. He gave a shiver, and for a moment the red eyes swung to him. Connor winced. There was a distant pain behind his scar, not nearly like the roaring agony that Harry got, but like something stirring, burrowing through his skull. Luckily, it went away after a moment, and then he only had Voldemort's smile and magic to face.

Only.

"You have done well, little serpent," Voldemort hissed, and then put his long fingers beneath Michael's chin and tilted up his face. "And now, go back to your den. You want to see Harry's face when you tell him what you did to his brother, don't you?"

Connor's muscles seized up, as much as they could under the bonds. *He's going to let Michael say where we are? Then—*

That was the problem, though. Connor had no idea where they were, other than underground. And if Michael had been brought by a Portkey—a Portkey that Voldemort destroyed now, with a casual flick of his fingers—and Apparated back, he wouldn't know, either, and anyone else would be mad to follow his directions and simply Apparate in with Voldemort waiting.

Assuming Harry stops to listen to those directions, before he kills him, Connor thought, and felt a brief, hot flare of satisfaction.

Then Michael was gone, and Voldemort turned to him, and Connor felt his head easing back to bare his throat.

"I will cut through Harry's Occlumency," Voldemort said softly. "We want your brother to see what's happening to you, don't we?"

The only rule, Connor thought, as he returned glare for glare, *is to put off screaming as long as you can.*

Harry landed back in the kitchen of Silver-Mirror, and yelled, without pausing to search, "Connor!"

There was no answer, though that shout surely should have brought one. Harry tried to calm his frantic breathing, tried to tell himself that Connor might still be sleeping in after his night with Parvati—

And then Parvati came running through the doorway, a towel wrapped around her dripping wet hair, and demanded, "What about Connor? Where is he? Has something happened to him?"

A whip of darkness struck Harry's heart, starrng it into ice. He heard more pops behind him as other people passed through the wards, but he couldn't turn to look at them. He lunged up the stairs, calling for his brother with all his might, while at the same time he woke every single ward and set it looking for Connor.

The wards were more efficient than even his wandless magic. They came back to him before he reached Connor's bedroom.

There was no sign of Connor anywhere in the house. But there had been, a few minutes before Harry Apparated back in, signs of Portkey use.

Harry felt his throat burn. His mind was cracking like his heart had at the implications. He whirled away into a tunnel with a maelstrom awaiting him at the bottom, and his breath sped until he was hyperventilating, and he had to lean against the banister because he was going to fall.

Then Draco was there, holding Harry firmly around the waist, and murmuring over and over to him, “Harry, it’s all right, we’ll get him back, it can’t be as bad as it looks—“

“Yes, it can.”

Harry looked up. Michael stood at the head of the stairs, and gazed down at him with an expression of vicious glee that Harry had last seen matched by Bellatrix Lestrange, his fingers tracing the burn on his face, over and over.

“You took so many precious things from me,” he hissed at Harry. “My brother, my mother, my sister, my self-respect—“ His eyes flicked over Harry’s head, and focused on Draco. “The one boyfriend I wanted to have.” His gaze fastened on Harry again. “And you never, you *never*, paid attention to me the way you did to other people, or tried to extend your sympathy to my losses. *Never*. You didn’t even care that I was making friends with your brother, you thought I was so harmless.” He drew himself up. “Well, now I’ve proved you wrong.”

“Where is he, Michael?” Harry thought Snape had asked that. Then he realized it was his own voice.

“With the Dark Lord.” Michael held out his hands and laughed a little. “I’m afraid that I can’t give you a more specific location.”

A moment later, his face went white, and he sagged against the banister, though he didn’t scream. Harry’s magic had broken his arm. Harry only felt the impulse of the rage a moment later, as the magic twisted and flowed past him and lazily circled Michael, humming and purring. He could have lied to himself, told himself that that was the taint of Voldemort’s magic and not his, but he couldn’t. He would rip Michael apart if it would get him the answers he wanted.

“Where is the Portkey you used?” he demanded.

“The D-Dark Lord destroyed it,” Michael said, and then coughed as the magic tightened around his throat. “Sent me back here to tell you,” he added, with a spark of defiance.

Snap, and snap, and snap. Harry stove in three of Michael’s ribs. He was three parts of his mind: magic, and clear thoughts, and the roaring pain beneath that, so that he did not have to feel everything from the loss of his twin yet.

“Was it worth it?” he asked, in his father’s voice.

Michael tossed his head up, panting. “Yes,” he whispered in a strained voice. “Oh, *yes*. You have no idea. The look on your face —“

Harry drew back one hand. He knew what would happen when that hand traveled forward. Michael would die.

Draco snatched his wrist, and then interposed himself between Harry and Michael, leaning hard against his arm. Harry stared at him. He could see Draco, but only in between darting, twirling particles of white and red. “Get out of my way, Draco.”

“No,” Draco said, as calmly as if he were speaking to Lucius about tea.

“He has to die.”

“Oh, yes, he does,” Draco said. “But there’s someone with a greater claim than you have to destroying him, someone with a greater *duty*. Remember the Dark pureblood dances you learned as a child, Harry.”

And then he did, and Draco was right, and murder drew back and circled away and left him alone. Harry dropped his hand. Draco didn’t let it go, but pulled Harry close to him, one arm circling his shoulders.

And then Harry drew a breath, and began to weep like a thundercloud breaking. Distantly, he was aware of Draco binding Michael, and speaking slicing words about how nothing he could have done would be enough to earn Draco’s respect, but that was distantly.

His mind was full of pain and grief and guilt and screaming panic. Every time he tried to make a plan, he crashed full-on into the fact that he didn't know what Voldemort would do with Connor.

The first of the Occlumency pools around his scar boiled into mist and vanished.

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Intermission: Love Grows Bitter With Treason

Owen shut the door behind him with a click so faint that he thought no one could have heard it save one who was listening for it. So, of course, Michael jerked his head up and fastened his eyes on his brother with a hunted, fervent look in them. His fingers, which had moved together in front of him like a nest of blind, burrowing worms, intertwined and interlocked, and then froze.

They had told him what his brother had done.

Owen moved a step forward, slowly. This room was a bare stone chamber, one of the many in Silver-Mirror that had been used for storing treasure. Then Harry had removed the artifacts in search of one that could help him fight Voldemort, and shifted treasures around so his guests could be comfortable, and it had become a mere construct of four walls and a floor. It made a perfect prison. Michael could find no weapons here, and he could not dig through the walls, and he could not charm the door open or the walls to weaken without his wand.

The question he asked then was predictable, but because he had to know, he had to ask it.

“Why?” His voice was quiet.

Michael laughed rackingly, as if he had contracted some fatal disease. Then he stopped, and said, “You know why, brother.”

“I want to hear you say it.” Owen's hand curled around his wand, deep in one robe pocket. Frustration shifted past his eyes like dark weed caught in the maze of a flowing river. It drifted on and was forgotten. He stood with his gaze locked on Michael, and waited for confirmation.

Michael tossed up a hand airily, and spoke the same way. “Oh, I don't know. Maybe because our mother and sister died, and still you didn't let that change your attitude towards me. Maybe because Harry made all these promises that he couldn't keep. Maybe because he's the center of the world, or thinks he is, the admired, the adored, the self-centered *vates*, and he never looked beyond himself in the way I needed him to. Maybe because—“

And then he was on his feet, and had Owen not been prepared for that, he might have overcome him and wrested his wand from him. As it was, Owen turned slightly, neatly, to the side, and Michael sprawled on the floor. Owen put a foot in the middle of his back. He had always been stronger than his brother, he thought, with the detachment necessary to this. In all things.

Michael struggled to rise. Owen ground down until he heard the crack of bone, and Michael cried out and went still.

“Tell me,” he whispered.

“I wanted Draco,” Michael whispered back, alone in this place before him. “And he rejected me. And neither of them even cared to look at me again, to ask me what I thought or how I felt or acknowledge that I was *dangerous*. I wanted to hurt Harry. I wanted to be part of something that hurt him. He deserved it. Draco doesn't—that's just the way he is, glittering, beautiful, selfish—but Harry sold himself differently. And then it turned out he wasn't different. I had to show him that.”

Owen nodded. It was what he had expected, but it had to be done. The condemned was allowed a confession.

He drew his wand.

Michael, twisting to look up at him, saw it. For a moment, he went still, and then he snorted. “Going to torture me, then? Your Lord allows that?” His voice was twisted, mocking, and he stared at Owen's covered left arm as if he could see the lightning bolt scar there. “I knew he was just a Lord after all, not a *vates*. Did he tell you that he tried to kill me, when I first told him what I'd done?”

“Draco told me.” Harry had been in no shape to tell Owen anything. Besides, he was motionless just then, under the influence of Dreamless Sleep. Snape had forced it down his throat when Harry saw the first vision of his brother's torture and began to

scream. Draco had fed Michael the healing potions, and told Owen the truth, and then sat back and looked at him in silence for a long time.

They were both the heirs of Dark families. They understood each other.

“That was good of him,” said Michael, and his face softened with some hint of an unnameable emotion. “Did he say—anything else about me?”

Owen moved back and lifted his boot, letting his brother scramble to his feet. “To tell you that he hopes the wild Dark makes you its plaything for eternity,” he answered, leveling his wand, “for hurting his partner, and kidnapping his brother-in-law.” Draco disliked Connor, but Connor was still connected to the Malfoys, unavoidably, and one did not do that kind of thing to a Malfoy relative.

Michael stared at him. “Owen. What are you going to do?” Puzzled, so puzzled, as if he did not know.

And perhaps he did not know, for he had always been deficient in education. Owen recited the words as his father had recited them to him, the day Charles sat him down and explained about the less pleasant duties of a family heir, a family head. “The head of a family is covered in glory, but the glory depends from responsibility. When a member of the family betrays his allies and dishonors his name, it is the family head’s responsibility to remove the dishonor. Otherwise, the chain of responsibility cracks, and the bauble of glory is revealed for the fool’s gold it is.”

“You and metaphors,” Michael said, and tried to laugh. It sounded rather hard with a dry throat.

“I am going to kill you,” Owen said.

And Michael’s face was white, all white. He didn’t think I would actually do this, Owen realized, meeting his twin’s eyes. *Maybe he wasn’t deficient in education, this once, maybe he did know what his treason meant, but he never thought I would go through with it.*

And that made Owen weary with a great weariness, because one thing Michael should have learned about him by now was how seriously he took his promises.

“And present my head to Harry, I suppose,” Michael said. He tried to drawl. It didn’t work.

“The heart used to be traditional,” said Owen, and began to summon all the force of his will. “In this case, since Harry would not want to subject me to having to cut apart my twin, I imagine your body will do.”

“No,” Michael whispered. “You can’t do this, Owen. You can’t. I’m your brother.”

“You are a disgrace to the Rosier-Henlin name.” Owen’s voice was as steady as his father’s would have been. And in that moment Owen was glad that Charles was dead, that he had not lived to see his son dishonor their name. “The family has always been more important than the individual.”

“I was controlled by Voldemort! I was—“

“The actions, and not the intentions, matter.” The magic filled him, welling towards the tip of his wand. “If Millicent Bulstrode had encountered her father on the field before he died, she would have been no less obligated to kill him. The laws are absolute.”

“Draco didn’t try to kill his father—“

“The Malfoys,” said Owen very precisely, “have not always been concerned with honor.” And then there it was, the moment when he must let his magic and his will fly or lose them all.

“*Avada Kedavra.*” He said the words tenderly, with love, granting his twin the dignity of a painless death, which Connor Potter would not have.

There was no shield against the Killing Curse.

Green light filled the room like a prayer.

When it was done, Owen stepped forward and gazed for a moment into the still eyes. He mourned, but distantly, gently. The

brother he mourned was one he had lost already, drowned into the currents of jealousy and hatred.

Michael had, perhaps, not been meant for the strict life he found himself living, the life of a Dark pureblood, the life of a Rosier-Henlin. But he had been born into it. He should have lived it, or he should have rebelled utterly and utterly fled, separating himself from what was left so that no one would expect its obligations from him.

He had tried to choose neither, tried to have all the rewards and none of the laws, and so his glory lay on the ground in smashed pieces of gold.

Owen opened the door. Draco waited there. He looked past Owen, and his face changed in no particular except to grow colder.

“It is done?” he asked.

Owen inclined his head. “It is. The dishonor is avenged.”

He walked out of the room, up the stairs, and to the roof of Silver-Mirror. He stood there for a time, watching the stars as they turned in their courses.

The life he lived was a cruel one, in some respects. He wished he could have lived it beside his twin.

But it was the life he had, and he had never given himself—never known *how* to give himself—in a way that was less than full-hearted. He was no halfway wizard, no halfway companion, no halfway family head.

He could be no halfway brother.

He had failed Michael, and that failure would walk with him like the ghosts of his parents and his sister. But he would have failed him still further if he had excused this and let Michael go on living as a spoiled, indulged child, never understanding what he had done wrong.

Besides, he knew what Draco would have done, or Harry, if he had not taken up the task of executing his brother himself.

His mourning and his mind alike were one pane of black glass, and his spirit was a light, cold, crisp gray, like morning on the first day of spring.

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Chapter Seventy-Five: The Decay of a Mind

Connor had long ago given up his vow against screaming. If he hadn't, then he would have bitten through his lips and his tongue, and then probably screamed anyway. Harry had said once it was better to gracefully surrender and rob your enemy of this means of stealing your dignity than to sit in stubborn silence when the torturer would win anyway.

Except that Voldemort was winning *anyway*.

He had already done some of what he had made Connor understand were minor tortures: broken his fingers, pulled his fingernails, applied hot knife blades to his back. He had done it all expressionlessly, and that was the memory that most remained with Connor out of the mess—that white, mask-like face watching him—when everything else had become a haze of pain. Then he had used healing spells, and Connor had been physically whole again, but with the memories in his mind like another scar. And Voldemort had cast a spell over him that appeared to do nothing, but which was long, complicated, in Latin as well as another language, and which Connor was sure would be taking effect any time now.

The worst thing, Connor thought, somewhere in the panting mire that his brain had become, was that he knew Harry was seeing all of this. Voldemort had told him so, carefully working through Harry's Occlumency and sending the visions to him. Of course, he could have been lying, but Connor had seen the expression of joy on his face just before the torture began. He thought Voldemort would find it hard to feign that much glee unless he had cause.

But then Voldemort began to unveil his latest torture, and Connor understood that, no matter how much it was convention to say so, the worst thing was *not* his brother seeing this. The worst thing was suffering it. The pain extinguished thoughts of Harry and brought Connor close to the edge of screaming madness.

It began with a nail.

Voldemort drove the nail through the fleshy underside of his arm and directly into the earth. Connor arched his back and screamed, but his enemy gave no sign that he had heard. He began to cast a long, intricate spell centered on the nail, while Connor lay shivering in shock, trying to come to terms with there being that much agony existing in the world.

He only became aware that his arm was changing when he felt his skin crawl in an odd way. He looked down.

McGonagall could not have done better. Brown streaks of corruption, the color of fallen autumn leaves scattered across a pavement and trampled in the rain, extended away from the nail, up towards his elbow and down towards his hand. Where they went, the flesh turned to sludge, sliding stickily away from the magic. Connor's muscles locked as he realized that this was his *arm*, the bastard was doing this to his *arm*, he couldn't be expected to stay silent in the face of this—

He screamed again just as the streaks locked into place, at the end of his fingers and at the crook of his elbow.

His bones began to melt. Connor reconstructed that later, because at the time he'd been kicked into a maelstrom of red and black that utterly consumed him. He cried so hard that something ruptured in his throat, and he tried to roll under the pain, the way Harry had described doing in the graveyard when Bellatrix cut off his hand, but there was no way under it. The pain *was* all that existed, over, above, under, below. Connor could not stop screaming.

Voldemort gave him time to recover, of course. When both his bones and flesh were sludge, Connor could draw a breath. He promised himself that he would not look at his arm, and, like all his promises since he came here, it was broken. He glanced down.

Voldemort Transfigured what was left, gathering up the broken slime and reshaping it into a tentacle.

Connor stared at the thing now growing from his right shoulder, and retched. Had his head still been bound down, as had happened at the beginning of the torture session, he would have choked on his own vomit. He managed to turn his head this time, but his chest still grew warm and soaked with small sliding pieces of food.

The tentacle crept over his face and crouched there, palpitating like the wings of a black butterfly. Connor could feel it tugging at his skin, as if his cheeks would shred any moment and fly into the thing's suckers. And he could picture the tentacle worming into his face, sinking into the bones of his skull, turning them to pulp such as his arm had become and feeding on them—

And this had been his arm. His *arm*. It was part of him now, made from the remains of his limb.

There was darkness and pain everywhere, and there was no end to it. Connor could almost feel his mind decaying. No one could walk through this unchanged. He would never again be what he had been.

There was mourning as well as pain in his scream. The tentacle wormed down and sealed his mouth shut with a sweet paste.

Harry could not take it. He had awakened from the Dreamless Sleep in time to see Voldemort begin the Transfiguration of Connor's arm. The Occlumency around his scar connection with the bastard was utterly gone now, and whenever he tried to summon more—a pitiful attempt, given that he *wanted* to see what was happening to his brother—Voldemort effortlessly cut through it. He saw the visions with his eyes opened or shut, though they were a little clearer in the darkness behind his eyelids.

And Voldemort had whispered the cost already, before he began the first torture session and during this one, while Connor writhed whimpering on the floor. Harry didn't think his brother could hear. The Dark Lord knew Harry was watching, though, and knew he heard.

“All it will take, Harry,” Voldemort said, without a smile in the face of crushing reality, “is for you to come to me. *You* are the one I want. You know it. My magic cannot be complete while the tunnel between us exists, and I want complete power. And will you really regret ending, when you know it saves your brother more pain?” His eyes never blinked, being made of magic. “I know you, Harry,” his voice whispered. “You once said you would die if you knew you caused more pain being alive than being dead. And now that time has come.”

Harry really thought he could have endured it if some of his Occlumency pools still existed. Then he could have shut his emotions away and thought about what his going would do to the war effort. He could have thought of more people than his brother writhing tortured in a deep cavern.

But the pools were gone, and his emotions crashed through his head, rampaging, blaming him and suggesting things to do all at once. He had never realized, truly, how sharp the teeth of guilt were.

So he had feigned sleep when Snape came to check on him and make sure the potion was keeping him silent, and now he crept down the stairs towards the front door of Silver-Mirror. One part of his plan was clear. He would get beyond the wards that protected the house, and Apparate.

The images of the burrow wavered in his mind like water disturbed by the touch of a hand.

It *had* to be enough to serve as an Apparition target. It would have to be. There was not—he could not—

He would have had to go if it were Draco. He could not have abandoned Draco to the necessities of war, frowned thoughtfully and said, “Well, I suppose I must stay safe, since my life is worth more to the war than his.”

And he would have to go to Connor.

He came level with the kitchen, and relaxed. The front door waited a short distance away now, and no one had stopped him. He wondered if Michael had been executed yet.

Then he forgot about it as the Voldemort behind his eyes cut Connor’s new limb off at the shoulder. And Harry sagged sideways, because, this time, Voldemort had found a way to transfer the physical pain as well as the image through the link—perhaps using a connection Harry and Connor had through their birth as twins, like the blood bond that allowed them to use the Switching Potion. Fire ate up and down Harry’s right side. He didn’t scream. He couldn’t scream, because sound would alert someone and prevent him from preventing more of this pain. Worse, and worse, than having his left hand taken.

A crushing pain centered in his chest, and he realized he had stopped breathing. Harry gave a choked sob and swallowed a whoosh. He had fallen so that he leaned against the kitchen doorway. He scrambled slowly up to his feet, and summoned his magic to wrap his right side in layers of soothing, cool air. It was cheating, but if he continued to be this distracted by pain, he couldn’t Apparate, and that meant he couldn’t save Connor from this.

Something coiled around his feet and tripped him up.

Harry fell, and then the same weight rolled expertly around his legs and crawled across his chest. Harry forced his eyes open and found himself meeting Argutus’s gaze. The Omen snake hissed at him. It was the first time Harry had ever heard him on the verge of panic.

“I saw a vision in my scales. You were moving. You were going to go. And then the vision ended, and I knew you would be dead if you went.” Argutus’s head wove back and forth endlessly, a series of little hisses breaking free around his words in what was the Parseltongue equivalent of curses. *“I don’t want you dead. You’re my friend.”*

“I have to go,” Harry whispered. “You don’t understand. This is my brother dying, and it’s my fault—*ah!*”

He arched his back, because Voldemort had figured out something new to do to Connor, and was breaking his spine, small tiny bone by small tiny bone. Harry felt Connor’s terror of permanent paralysis as clearly as if he were in the same room and his brother were speaking to him. He rolled, frantic, his magic lashing misdirected, but coming more and more under his control as the fear focused. He had to get *out* of the house, had to find Connor and exchange their places. Merlin, he was so tired of *hurting*, and of *causing pain*, and that was what had to end.

Footsteps vibrated in his head as if he had become a snake, to hear them that way, and then hands curled around his shoulders and forced him to his feet. Harry stumbled. He couldn’t walk, could he, since Voldemort had snapped his spinal cord?

Draco was shouting into his ear. “Harry, you can’t do this! You know this is what he wants, for you to walk up to him, defenseless, and unarmed by pain. You can’t—“

“I would if it were you!” Harry screamed, so powerfully that something tore in his throat. “I would if it were Snape! This is my *brother*.” He got his feet under him, though still not control of his magic, and lunged for the door.

Argutus squeezed him, stealing his breath and spilling him to the floor. Draco’s arms wrapped around his shoulders, and Draco murmured meaningless nonsense into his ear until he said, “Sir? You have another vial of the Dreamless Sleep, then? And it’s safe for him to take that this soon?” A pause. “Good.”

No!

Harry did his best, but the visions behind his eyes and the pain echoing up and down his body made it hard to move even as they fed his resolve. Someone opened his mouth. Someone else poured the potion down it. And someone else, or maybe the first or second person, made sure he swallowed it.

Harry raged as he disappeared into the blank peace of slumber, though none of them could hear or feel it. *I have to be here to see what he does! Don't you understand? Who can be witness to this, if not me? And who can stop it, if not me?*

Connor did not know what was happening. Voldemort had stopped torturing him, and used healing spells and potions and magic. Connor didn't like to think about repairing his spine and giving him another arm that looked exactly like his first one. That did puzzle him, in the very small part of his mind where he could think about such things. Why wouldn't Voldemort want to kill him in front of his twin? Or did he think Harry was asleep right now or otherwise unable to focus, and so he was waiting until Harry was fully conscious and could "appreciate" it better?

He stood, on his feet, with a whip in his right hand and a knife in his left. And he shivered, and did not know what would happen.

Voldemort gave a low hiss. A pair of snakes writhed into view through the burrow entrance. Connor cowered instinctively, an old, remembered pair of golden eyes dominating his mind. Strange how the Chamber of Secrets could still seem so frightening to him, or the idea of dying at the eyes of a basilisk, when he was in the middle of an experience far more terrifying.

But they weren't basilisks, Connor saw a moment later. Properly speaking, they weren't snakes at all, just constructs of magic. They dragged a burden to Voldemort's feet and then vanished into wisps of smoke. Voldemort spent a moment staring down at the bundle. Connor craned his neck, but the way Voldemort stood made it impossible to see what the thing was.

Then Voldemort stepped aside, and Connor saw, with a horror that appalled him so much it clouded his understanding, a girl of about twelve lying at his feet. Muggle? Pureblood? He could not tell, and it didn't matter. If she were magical, Voldemort had certainly made her a Squib already.

Connor lunged forward, trying to stick Voldemort with the knife, trying to save her.

In a moment, he hung suspended above the ground on a meathook he couldn't see but could feel in his neck, and Voldemort smiled lazily at him, his long yew wand swinging in his hand like the claw on a massive cat's paw.

"I cannot use compulsion on you," he said, and then laughed. Connor was not sure what was so funny. "And our—connection—is not of the sort to encourage commands, though perhaps at the last I could try to separate your scar from you. But some methods of control are beyond your opposition." He gave a lazy flick of his wand, and if Connor's own terrified heartbeat had been a notch louder, he would have missed the incantation. "*Imperio.*"

Fog came crawling into Connor's mind. Connor had heard the Imperius Curse described as a comforting sensation, a yearning to do exactly what the caster told you to do, but this wasn't like that at *all*. This was more like the mist that could shroud a particularly lonely walk home, and make him fear what horrors lurked in it. He retained enough of his will to be horrified by it, but not enough to make the difference in resisting it. He suspected Voldemort had probably learned to twist the spell to produce exactly that effect, because, of course, Connor thought, with a bitterness that shocked him, ordinary Unforgivable Curses weren't enough for the Dark Lord.

The meathook dropped him. Connor staggered in the sand, then rose and walked towards the girl.

"You know what to do," Voldemort murmured, and stepped out of the way.

And while his mind did not, his hands did.

The whip struck the girl across the stomach, and she woke from whatever stupor or slumber the Dark Lord had put her in. She opened her eyes, saw him, and screamed.

Not for very long. The whip coiled out, found its target, and pulled. The girl's tongue came loose from its bearings, yanked by the whip. She still wailed, her mouth filled with blood, but the sound had grown muffled to a series of croaks. Connor could feel Voldemort's pleasure from behind him.

He wanted to cry. He did cry out for the Light, in his mind, but there was no answer.

He slapped the girl again and again with the whip, taking one eye, taking the top of an ear, taking any beauty she might have had left in her face. The tip of the whip was iron, coated with what smelled like some of the more acidic ingredients they'd used in Potions class. Wherever it struck, it left a wound that would sink deep and mar forever, assuming the girl was allowed to live past the torture. Connor did not think she would be.

His hands knew she wouldn't. When Voldemort grew tired of the whip, Connor knelt down and began to carve her alive, to joint her as if she were a pig he were preparing for food. He felt his stomach buck and heave and roil, but either Voldemort kept that under control too, or he had simply retched everything in it up during the first rounds of torture and there was nothing left. He did have to pause in his carving several times to dry-heave.

The girl screamed throughout it, until he cut too deeply, and there was too much blood, and she was dead. Connor's hands never faltered. He prepared her carefully, slabs of flesh on a blanket of skin, and when Voldemort bade him, he picked up one piece and put it into his mouth, chewing slowly.

Voldemort ended the Imperius Curse then, of course, so that Connor had something to expel from his stomach this time. He dropped the knife and the whip, but it was too late, wasn't it, with the images of what he had done carved into his brain? And all around him was the Dark Lord's gentle laughter.

Harry woke slowly. The Dreamless Sleep hadn't lasted as long this time. He wondered dismally if his own magic had worked to burn it up, knowing that Harry wanted to be awake and see what was happening to his brother, or whether Voldemort had found a way to get through that barrier, along with the Occlumency shields.

His heart banged against his chest, and his mind banged inside his skull. He lay still, watching Connor carve and eat the girl, because he was in the middle of a shock too numb and deep for tears. Then he started to move to throw his legs over the bed, but a voice spoke, and Harry froze. *Someone's in the room with me. I should pretend to be asleep long enough for them to leave.*

"What are we going to do with him?" That was Draco, but it actually took Harry a moment to identify his voice. He sounded so simple, so weary, in a way that Harry hadn't heard from him in months, since at least his mother's death. He was a child begging for reassurance from an adult, and it was Snape who answered in that role.

"I do not know," said Snape. "The Dreamless Sleep will hold him for a time, but *only* a time, before it becomes too dangerous to use. We must, instead, speak to him and convince him to remain here, that going to his brother will damage the war effort. Even if he went there with the intention to kill Voldemort instead of sacrifice himself, he could not manage it. There is still the last Horcrux."

"We can't convince him of that," Draco said simply. "You don't understand, sir. It's not just the emotional shock of seeing his brother tortured like that. I saw his eyes. He's going mad. The strain will make him *unable* to listen to us, unable to realize the very rational points you bring up."

"The only other choice is keeping him drugged until Potter dies." Snape's voice showed strain of its own, now. "Do you suggest this? Especially when the Dark Lord might toy with his new pet for months?"

I would do as much for either of you, Harry thought, his hands clenching under the blankets. Don't you realize that? If it were you taken, sir, or you, Draco, I'd go after you. I came for Snape in the Chamber of Secrets. I took Draco from Rosier, and I froze when Voldemort had him. Why don't they see that I can't abandon him just because it's Connor? They may dislike him, they may despise him, but I don't, I love him, and I'm the one who has to make this decision.

"Not that," said Draco. "But I think there's one other thing that may work." He hesitated for a long moment, then said, "Sir, will you leave us alone for a few minutes?"

Snape caught his breath. "You mean to say—"

"Yes, sir. Harry's awake, and has been for the last few minutes." Harry heard the chair Draco was sitting in creak as he moved across the room to the bed. A moment later, a hand caressed his cheek, welcome as a drink of cool water across his tongue, and Harry couldn't stop himself from leaning into it, even as his conscience told him, sharply, that Connor was suffering right now, and why wasn't he on his way to stop the suffering? "I can always tell by the way he breathes, now. And I need privacy for what I'm about to tell him."

He must mean to help me! Joy flooded Harry like Light, like phoenix song. *I knew he understood, that he'd help me! But he needs Snape out of the room so that we can make our escape.* He gave a compliant little sigh and shifted closer to Draco, as if he planned to cooperate, but he didn't open his eyes. There was the chance that Snape would read the truth, and the hope, out of them with Legilimency.

Snape waited in silence, and Harry *did* wish he could open his eyes and see the look Draco was giving him. At last, Snape said, heavily, "Very well. Do remind him that he has a father and a lover, Mr. Malfoy."

"I'll tell him what I choose to tell him." Draco's voice was quick and bright with anger.

Snape didn't say anything else, though Harry could imagine his expression. Instead, there came the sounds of his boots crossing the floor, and then the door opened and closed behind him.

Harry opened his eyes at once, and smiled up at Draco. "Thank you," he whispered. "I was stupid to leave by the front door, wasn't I? We should try the roof this time. I can summon brooms, or we can Apparate from there. I should know well enough what the burrow looks like, by now."

"Harry."

And then Harry saw that Draco wasn't smiling, and he saw the utter, quiet focus and determination in the lines around his mouth, and he knew Draco wouldn't help.

But—Draco had sent Snape away, had argued against drugging him into helplessness. If he didn't mean to help Harry get to Connor, then what did he mean to do? Curiosity, and fear, and the desire not to hurt Draco by tossing him aside with magic, kept Harry in the bed, staring up at his partner.

Draco took a deep breath, leaned in, and placed his forehead against Harry's. Harry started. He hadn't realized, until he felt the coolness of Draco's skin, how hot his own scar was.

"I have no right to ask this of you," Draco began. "And if I were a Gryffindor, I'd already be helping you. Sacrificing the world to the individual, and all that. Helping you with your great love for your brother, though it cost me." He took another deep breath, and his face shifted and closed.

"But I'm a Slytherin, and I'm selfish, and I love you, and I *listened* to what you said about going to Voldemort if he had Snape or me, while Snape only heard nonsensical babbling. There are some things you can't do, that you could never do. Leave your brother to be tortured. Leave me. Leave Snape."

"Yes, yes," Harry whispered. "You *understand*. Come on, Draco, he's making him torture people, he's—"

"And so," Draco said, his voice as heavy as iron bells, "I'm asking you not to leave me, Harry."

There was a long pause. Harry could feel understanding creeping nearer on clawed feet, but he did not want to *feel* it. He shoved it away when it tried to mount into the forefront of his mind.

"What?" he whispered. "I don't understand."

"Going to Connor," Draco continued, steady as rain, "will mean leaving me. You'll die, and I'll suffer. I love you, Harry. You know how much. And when Voldemort kills you, even if he keeps your bargain and leaves off torturing your brother, he'll come and torment me. Do you want that to happen? Would you really leave me here, expose me to that?"

Harry stiffened. This could not be. Draco would not do this to him. It was not fair.

Except that Draco had been the one to, among other things, keep urging Harry to face up to the truth of his past even when it would have been most comfortable for Harry to just leave things alone. He had kicked and screamed and punched their love into being, because he wanted it. He had chosen the most dangerous Dark ritual for his Declaration he could think of, because he knew the depths of his own heart far better than either Harry or Lucius did.

He did things because he wanted them. And he had the strength to ask this of Harry, to play his love for him against his love for Connor, one thing he could never do against another thing he could never do.

Harry began to cry.

Draco leaned nearer, wrapping him in strong arms, and murmured over and over again into his ear. “It’s not done, Harry. We can find a means to capture Evan Rosier and destroy the final Horcrux. And when that moment comes, I swear by Walpurgis and may the wild Dark destroy me if I do not keep my vow, I’ll go with you to find Connor. We’ll *face* Voldemort, Harry, and we’ll *defeat* him. The war will be over, and the world will be safe, and you’ll have all of us. Just promise me that you won’t go now, because I love you, and I need you.”

The world was impossible. The world was cruel.

Harry could no more do one thing than he could do the other.

But about one thing, Draco was right. There was still a chance of rescuing them both this way, if only a small one. So far, Voldemort had shown no signs of killing Connor. But Harry would never know if he would kill Draco or only keep him alive through years of torment, if Harry died in this bargain and was not alive to see it happen or not happen.

He knew the strength it must have taken Draco to do this, and someday, when his mind was not breaking and shattering into tiny shards, he could even acknowledge it.

He nodded, and promised.

Connor could not even keep up with the transformations and the pain now, and by that alone, he knew he would never be the same.

Limbs became spikes of bone that held him to the ground while Voldemort broke his ribs over and over again. Torture drove the blood out of him, and drove it back in again. Voldemort gave him visions of himself raping Parvati, raping the body of the girl he had murdered, tearing Harry apart. He dragged the darkness from the back of Connor’s mind to the front, and found the jealousy of Harry he still retained, the jealousy of Draco he had never acknowledged, the fact that Connor considered himself good at nothing but Quidditch and cheering people up.

The world cracked and crazed around him, and not even the knowledge that he had been under Imperius when he killed the girl could sustain him. He had still done it. His hands had been the ones that wielded the whip and the blade, and his mouth had been the one that chewed the meat.

He curled up around himself, and sanity went away.

Draco sat with his head in his hands, taking deep breaths. He had forced himself through saying those things to Harry, but he had not known how much *effort* it would take. And Harry, of course, had already grabbed a book on summoning spells and retreated to his room. Snape had set wards to let them know if anyone went in or out. They would know if Harry fled.

Draco *knew* he would not.

It was one thing to be willing to inflict such pain on someone, another to do it. Draco lifted his head and stared down at his hands, noting with academic interest how they shook. Then he lowered his chin to rest on them again, and closed his eyes.

It had been necessary, he told himself for the fiftieth time. No one else could have made Harry listen. And he *had* to listen. Too much would be lost if he went to Voldemort, too much sacrificed for the sake of one life. And the idea that Voldemort would keep his bargain and free Connor if Harry went to him was laughable.

And the idea of losing Harry—

No. No. That image could give Draco strength against anything, even strength to do as he had done just now.

It was *horrible*. He was sorry that he had had to do it. But he would have done it again.

He knew, for the first time, the very first time, exactly what Harry meant when he said that he stood witness for the dying because no one else would do it, and someone had to. Draco had lost another part of his childhood that day.

He wondered if his father had ever done something as hard and as necessary as this. He thought not. He would have seen the marks of it if so, and Lucius Malfoy's face was too unlined.

"Mr. Malfoy."

Draco looked up, wondering at the oddly formal tone from Snape. He stood in the doorway, and the moment Draco's glance fell on him, he bowed his head. Draco just stared.

"Well done, Mr. Malfoy," Snape said calmly, and Draco understood then. Snape was addressing him as an adult because he considered him that way.

"You fucker," Draco said, without strength. "You stood outside the door and listened to the conversation, didn't you?"

Snape's eyes showed no trace of guilt. "I had to know what you would say. I was prepared to Body-Bind both of you if you had agreed to help him leave."

"You couldn't have bound Harry for long," Draco muttered.

"I would have used Legilimency, then." Snape took a step forward. "You are right. He is—not sane. He will not be sane until the end of this, if then. There will be healing for both him and his brother to do."

"I'm so *tired* of this." Draco buried his head in his hands again, not caring how childish it looked. "Pain after pain after pain, and where is the end of it?"

"You chose this when you chose to bind yourself to Harry," Snape said, without malice. "We both did. I knew what I was facing when I helped him rebuild his mind at the end of your second year, and I could have turned aside from the road. But I did not." A shadow slid over his face. "And we should remember that more of this is the result of Voldemort's existence than Harry's."

Draco started to reply, and then Snape turned and was gone like an arrow out of the room. Draco stared after him with his mouth open, then followed hastily. He knew only one thing which would have made Snape run like that now. *The wards on Harry's room sounded.*

A terrible anger began to coil itself inside him like a basilisk. If he had made this sacrifice of himself and it was all for nothing, he believed he could be angry enough at Harry to break their joining.

But when they arrived at the open door and the empty room, Snape halted and said at once, "He did not go willingly. He was taken."

"How can you tell?" Draco swept the room with a glance, but he had been far more involved in talking to Harry than memorizing what it looked like. The blankets on the bed were rucked, but they could have been like that earlier; Harry had not had an easy sleep. And the book on summoning spells was tossed aside, but that could also have happened if Harry had decided to bolt.

"The wards," Snape said briefly, and then waved his wand, hissing an incantation under his breath. Smoke flooded from every corner of the room, crossing in front of their eyes. Snape stared hard at it, and Draco did, too, eyes watering, until the smoke curled and assumed the shape of letters spelling out the name of Harry's kidnapper.

Henrietta Bulstrode.