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Chapter Seventy-Six: *Morituri Te Salutant*

Harry woke slowly. His brain was fogged, confused. He knew he had taken up the book of summoning spells to study, and to make sure that he could find out how to call Evan Rosier and destroy the last Horcrux *now, today*. The moment he destroyed it, he could face Voldemort and destroy *him*, since there would be no Horcruxes to protect him anymore, and then he could take Connor home and heal him. And in that way, he would keep both his promise of love to his brother and his promises of love to other people and his duty to the magical creature species he had yet to free as *vates*. He did see that, once Draco had explained it. If he had done nothing but sacrifice his life against Voldemort—and it would have been sacrifice, since he could not have killed him without destroying the Hufflepuff Cup—then he would have done nothing but buy Connor a few more moments of life. Oh, he might have died in the name of his principles, but he would not have fulfilled them.

Those thoughts were so strong that for long moments he didn't notice he wasn't in his bedroom. Then he wondered if Snape and Draco had come up, administered another dose of Dreamless Sleep, and removed him to a more secure place. He felt a current of indignation. Didn't they *trust* him to keep his word about staying in Silver-Mirror, once he was convinced of the necessity?

And then he remembered Henrietta.

He tried to sit up. He reached a halfway position before he jackknifed and fell to the ground again. He coughed and looked weakly from side to side. He knew that having visions of his brother's suffering forced into his mind had reduced his visual acuity and his perceptiveness, but he should surely have noticed his bonds before now.

And his location, he thought dazedly. He lay on the grass near a pine copse, beneath the open sky, and a faint intimation of light in the east said dawn was coming. Vines bound his limbs, curled around his shoulders and waist, and had just settled into a comfortable position about his neck. Harry shook his head. *Vines. Why did she bring me to a patch of vines?*

If, of course, it was Henrietta who did this.

He felt almost ready to meet anyone else who could have abducted him, though. For one thing, destroying someone evil would have felt good. And for another, he had endured all the grief and pain and fear that he could for right now. His brain floated in a haze of numbness, and he saw no more visions. He was not sure whether Voldemort had ceased to torture Connor, or whether his magic had shut down the connection.

Why would she have taken me? Why would she have brought me here? Harry was sure he had never been here before, and it was a very long way from any safehouse he knew of. Perhaps it was a place special to Henrietta, but she could have mentioned it to him, and he would have traveled there of his own free will, without her having to abduct him. Of course, that would have had to wait until Connor was rescued and at least partially healed, and perhaps she had not wanted to wait.

But why? No matter how he thought upon it, worked upon it, his perplexity grew. He could remember Henrietta leaning over him now, putting pressure on a nerve in the side of his neck that drove him unconscious, but that got him no nearer to the truth of why she had done it.

Then a rustle sounded to the side, and Harry managed to turn his head against the pull of the vines to regard Henrietta. She wore a thick gown of some dark color—autumn brown, he thought, or deep red. She came close to him and stood over him, looking down with a faint smile.

“Why?” Harry whispered, since no other word occurred to him at the moment.

Henrietta gave him a smile as vast and tender as the sky, and then knelt next to his legs, running a hand over his arm. “Harry,” she breathed. “Did you really think I was a *tame* Slytherin?”

Harry shook his head, in denial and more confusion. “That doesn't answer the question of why you brought me here,” he pointed out.

“You would never have lured Evan.” Henrietta rose to her feet and looked to the north, and soft as her voice was, Harry had the impression that she was speaking mostly to herself. “He has no reason to come to you, no reason to bring the Cup if he does. But for me—oh, yes. The hatred will pull him. I told him once what happens to Dark wizards and witches who hate each other as much as we do. He didn't believe me, but he still has no choice save to act on it.” Her hand smoothed her dress with a small, repetitive, hypnotic motion.

“Does this have something to do with why we couldn’t summon him with that rune circle?” Harry demanded. He could feel his magic building up under his skin, though as yet the numbness prevailed, and he could not bring himself to actually attack Henrietta. “Did you interfere? Meddle with some of the runes so that they wouldn’t do what they were supposed to do?”

Henrietta’s blink was cat-like. “No,” she said. “But I suspected what had happened when you told me of the spell’s response. During my last meeting with Evan, he was different. The shard of Voldemort’s soul has migrated out of the Horcrux, I think, and possessed him. Thus, though his body still walks the world, Evan Rosier as you knew him has ceased to exist.”

“Your *meeting* with him.” Anger ate quietly at the numbness.

“Yes.” Henrietta inclined her head. “I have been writing to him and meeting with him for some time, in order to get him fascinated enough that he would have no choice but to come to me when I wanted.” She turned and checked the eastern horizon this time, apparently calculating the position of the sun. “And that time is now,” she added, and drew her wand from her pocket. She raised her voice. “Evan!”

“You can’t just *take* me,” Harry hissed. “Do you know what’s happening right now, what my brother is suffering?”

“Of course I do.” Henrietta tapped her wand against her palm. “And I know, too, that you have no choice of saving him unless you destroy the last Horcrux, and I know that you should have paid more attention to the fifth stanza of the fourth prophecy.” She turned to the north. “Evan!”

It took Harry a moment’s struggle to recall that stanza, and when he did, he felt foolish for not understanding the matter at once.

*The fourth, in the old hatred curled
Has found its way to move and end.
Beware, for when you most wish to hide from the world,
You’ll be taken by one who’s a friend.*

That said, at least, that he could trust Henrietta’s intentions. Maybe. Harry had more personal experience with the slipperiness of prophecies than anyone he knew.

“What makes you think I won’t break free and prevent your sacrifice for the Horcrux?” he asked. The magic was bubbling to his face now. He could open his mouth and shoot something foul at Henrietta, or simply burst the vines.

“You should have recognized the plants by now, Harry, really.” When Henrietta looked back at him, her face expressed slight disappointment. “Do you like them? I requested the seeds from Indigena’s garden, via Lazuli. She was happy to send them to me.”

Harry strained, and then realized the truth. He *had* felt the clutch of these vines before, on a Midwinter night more than two years ago, when he confronted Voldemort and Indigena in the graveyard near the Riddle house. These were the vines that Indigena had used to bind his wandless magic.

“I can’t have you interfering,” said Henrietta, in a voice of glacial calm. “But, at the same time, you need to be here after the Horcrux, so that you can swallow the shard of soul and the magic that’s binding it to Evan’s body—or the Cup, if it flees there.” Her smile gave a feral flash. “Strike with all your might, Harry, when I am done. For me.”

She raised her voice again. “*Evan!*” It struck like thunder through the clearing, and Harry heard behind it the sweet thunder of the prophecy—and, more distantly, the soft, padded footsteps of a huge dog. He would not be surprised to see a black hound step from the copse of pines soon. “Come to me, if you are not a coward!” Henrietta yelled.

“I am here, Henrietta.”

Harry jumped as best he could in the grip of the vines. A cloaked figure strode from the north, around the pines. He held a wand in his hand with more steadiness than Evan Rosier had ever gripped it. Harry snarled softly. It seemed that Henrietta’s guess about the shard of Voldemort’s soul taking Rosier over was correct, and knowing that a piece of the bastard was so near made him want to destroy it *now*.

He envisioned Rosier’s body decaying, falling apart into the kind of sludge that Voldemort had briefly turned Connor’s arm into.

His magic rose as far as the vines before it slammed back into his body, like a kitten striking a closed door full-force.

“Let me go, Henrietta!” he shouted, thrashing about. The vines curled a little tighter. Harry had no trouble feeling the rage this time.

“No,” said Henrietta simply, and then she smiled, a smile so fierce that Harry lost his breath and recovered from the anger a moment. “This is my free will, *vates*, and you cannot prevent it. You should never have turned your back on me.” She bowed her head, dipping into a half-curtsey. “You may dislike the title, but you have ever been my Lord. Farewell, Harry. *Morituri te salutant*,” she added, and then turned and ran merrily away.

“Henrietta!” Harry shouted. “How do you plan to set me free from these vines if you die in the duel?”

She only flipped him a wave with one hand, her attention fixed on her opponent.

Harry went back to digging his heels into the ground. He could not use magic to tear the vines, but perhaps he could rip them by sheer force of physical strength.

Before him, Henrietta danced, in madness and hatred and love. Harry was not even aware when his struggles ebbed and he lay there gaping, content to watch her. There was no way that anyone could not have watched.

It was dawn, and Lady Death watched from the copse, and Henrietta whirled in the midst of a lovers’ waltz.

Henrietta felt all other concerns fall away from her as she came forward, and halted, and bowed to Evan.

This was what she had been working towards for months. And now the moment was here, and she had no more elaborate plans to arrange, no letters to write that would fan the sparks of Evan’s madness and keep him rushing towards her, no more commitments of sanity and soul to make that might end up costing her more than she gained. She had put herself at risk every time she wrote a letter, every time she went to meet him, every time she conversed with him as if they were equals.

But if she had not entered into this with her full heart, Evan would have known something was wrong, and he might have managed to pull back in time.

Not this time, not this time, not so, and Henrietta’s heart was high and singing like a lark. She wished one were in flight above them, singing to make the music for their dance, their duel.

Well, I can pretend that one is, and it will be less mad than many things Evan has been convinced of.

When she straightened from the bow, she saw the alien intelligence watching her through amused dark eyes. “And how do you plan to fight in that, my lady?” he asked, gesturing to her heavy robe.

“It is the traditional costume for such a duel,” Henrietta replied, holding out her wand. She was not worried. The shard of the Dark Lord might be in control, yes, but if Evan, her Evan, were not still alive somewhere within that damaged and twisted mind, he would never have come to this summons. The fascination she had encouraged, the poetic madness, was all Evan’s. “And I could ask the same of you.” His robes were dirty and disgusting. It seemed that this last piece of Voldemort’s soul didn’t care any more about wild living or fine clothes than Evan had, or maybe the constant fight for control in his mind reduced his ability to take care of himself.

From above her came skylark song. Henrietta smiled slowly.

“I plan to destroy you,” said that too-calm, too-sane voice. “You have caused me too much trouble.” And he was drawing his wand, but it was Evan’s wand, and Henrietta had faced it in the past and knew what it was capable of.

“Of course I have,” she said, and stamped her foot, and then the whirling pace began.

The spells he fired at her were all offensive, not defensive. *Cogo. Crucio. Cremo. Adulto cordis. Imperio. Avada Kedavra*. Spells in languages she had never heard and did not know the names of, but could well imagine the effects of, should they land. He never tried a Shield Charm. His manner said, plainly, that he would worry about that when she managed to land a blow.

Henrietta responded with defensive magic. *Protego. Haurio*. Incantations that increased the movements of her legs and the strength of her arms and somewhat compensated for the heavy robes. She wondered, distantly, that Evan, or Voldemort, or the mingling of the two that was in control of the body, had not thought she would use such spells. Of course she would. He seemed

to have little notion of cheating, unless he was the one doing it.

She was sensitive to the rhythm and the pace behind the movements, and she increased the tempo, beat by beat, circle by circle. She kept trying to strike at an opening in his defenses, but he always closed it quickly and returned to the flowing motion. His incantations were coming faster and faster now, and most of them were nonverbal, odd rests of silence in between the shouted spells. Henrietta knew she had been extremely lucky to escape them so far.

If “luck” could be said to have anything to do with it, when a Dark wizard and Dark witch danced in a fated duel like this.

The pattern was only like that on his side, however, though Henrietta was sure that it was the only side he paid attention to. On her side, she hesitated in blocking the unfamiliar spells, and whirled aside from more and more of them. Then she stumbled, her foot catching in the robe, and he grazed her knee in a thin line, with a spell that should have done much more damage.

“First blood to me,” he announced, sounding pleased about that.

“In this dance, only death counts,” Henrietta snapped back, and returned to her pattern. Now she could see him sensing it, in the way he responded and the spells he chose if nothing else. She faltered every few rings, each time became a little more clumsy, and then a little more. Strong as mountains her resolve might be, but her body was a poor vehicle for it.

So her body said. So her mind would say, on the surface, should he possess the Legitimacy of his embodied counterpart. So her full heart said, as she gave herself to this deception just as she had to the flirtation with Evan. The dance had to be perfect.

Down and down and down.

They danced and they danced and they danced, and Henrietta began to murmur under her breath and sing, scraps and fragments of the poetry she knew Evan had some reason to be familiar with, because he had believed the poets’ parents to be Squibs or wizards or witches. Yeats. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. George Meredith. Algernon Charles Swinburne. Arthur Symons. Thomas Lovell Beddoes. All those who had walked sometimes in the strange and dark ways of love and death, Eros and Thanatos, the singers to them and their celebrants.

She watched awareness flare in his eyes, and his movements slow a bit, as her Evan’s consciousness struggled to climb back to the surface. The Voldemort-shard had to stop fighting, sometimes, in order to slow him down. Henrietta did not want that to happen too much, because it would disrupt the pattern she had established, so she ceased to quote the poetry after a time.

Besides, she needed her breath too much for *breathing* just then.

Sweat ran down her face and dried in the still-cool air. It might be the second day of spring, but the weather did not feel like it. The robe lifted and whirled around her thighs, and heat exploded outwards from her skin. Eyes watched Henrietta from the copse, and from behind her, where Harry lay entangled and enthralled among the vines. Overhead, the skylark sang.

And then came the moment, the point, the *time*.

Henrietta began her movement in the turning point of the pattern when Evan was just beginning to launch his spell. She turned aside from him, and dropped to one knee, and the will that filled her mind was concerned not with defense or the battle, but love and death.

Ave, domine! Morituri te salutant.

The spell she shot was not a defensive one, but a Severing Curse, cutting the vines and freeing Harry from them.

Evan, caught in the pattern, trapped in it, could not stop his own spell from flying, or change it to a different one.

Henrietta closed her eyes and tipped her head back as a steel arrow went through her heart. The music of the dance sounded in her ears as one great crash of chords and then went still.

Henrietta Bulstrode died laughing.

Harry knew the Unassailable Curse was broken. He knew it by the way Lady Death roared from behind him, the hungry cry of an enormous dog starving for meat. He knew it in the way Rosier’s movements slowed for just a moment, as though a defense so

much a part of him he hadn't noticed he was depending on it had fallen away.

He knew it in the way Henrietta sprawled on the ground, life freely given, a steel arrow sprouting from her chest, and the cry that had reached him and echoed in his mind—how? He did not know. Perhaps through the connection they still shared because of the Unbreakable Vows, perhaps only because he *knew* what she would say as she died.

And he was free.

He rose to his feet, and called a wheel of diamond shards with hardly a thought. Evan Rosier was hurrying forward to kneel beside Henrietta. He picked up her head by her long curls and stared into her face as if he did not understand, then gave her a little experimental shake. He seemed to think the life was in her and would return if he only pulled enough.

Harry sent the revolving wheel straight at his head.

He looked up in the moment before it reached him, and the flying triangles of diamond shared off his jaw, sliced through his face under the nose, continued upwards at an angle and shaved off the top of his skull. His hair went flying. Brains drained like jelly down the sides of his face, and his body sprawled over Henrietta's, shorn at last of grace and poetry, tricked into death by a woman he may even have believed truly loved him.

Harry had sharp eyes, though, and did not let the momentum of Rosier's death distract him. He was looking for the small black scrap that flew pitifully away from the back of Rosier's skull a moment later, shrieking in a high, thin voice that made blood burst from his ears.

Harry roared wordlessly, and opened his *absorbere* gift. The tunnel scooped up the shard of soul and crushed it utterly, closing around it like a fist. The shrieking rose higher, in fear that Harry enjoyed, and then went silent. Harry tucked and yanked it into him, and the explosion of magic that followed, which probably represented the power the piece of soul had used to bind itself to Rosier's body.

The moment he finished swallowing, a ragged bay made the copse of pines shake, and the silver dogs-head emblem in Harry's left palm burned cold as deep sea ice.

Then there was silence, and he sagged to his knees and began to laugh, and to cry. Snot dribbled down his face from his nose, and his eyes were swollen in moments from the tears, and his throat hurt as much from the laughter as it earlier had from the screaming. He tried to recover, but he couldn't even *think* until he spat the churning emotions out.

And then he was on his feet, as he realized what the destruction of the last part of Voldemort's soul meant.

He could free his brother. He could confront Voldemort. He would go back to Silver-Mirror to inform Draco and Snape of what had happened, but then he was on his way to kill the snake-faced bastard.

He reached out to Voldemort, through their link, and said in a voice like a snapping of steel chains, *I am ready. Tell me where you are.*

The voice that returned his communication was more amused than he had ever heard it, which could only mean, Harry thought, that he hadn't sensed the destruction of the last piece of his soul. *In the place where it began, and the place where it will end. I am sure that you can find it. My heir.*

That was all he said, but Harry found, thinking about it carefully, that he *did* know. Where it began.

Voldemort was under Godric's Hollow.

With firm steps, Harry crossed to Henrietta's body, and bent his head to kiss her cold lips. Then he turned and leaped for Silver-Mirror.

Yes, where it began. And where it will end.

I am coming, Voldemort—for my brother's life, and for your death.

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Chapter Seventy-Seven: All the Joy Before Death

Connor had known a simulacrum of peace before some hours before he felt someone pressing on the outer shell of his mind. He waited for a moment, and the person began to tow the scattered pieces of his sanity towards the center. He knew he would be sane again if they came back together, though it had been long enough now that “sanity” was a word and not a concept to him.

But he could still remember pain. And he knew that he did not want to go back.

He struggled and kicked. He didn't know if his body echoed his movements, or if they were only in his mind; he had lost track of his body, too. He did know that he was crying, and whether that was with or without sound, he gave as much power to his voice as to his movements. He was tired. He had ceased to care about dignity or pride or honor, which were words like “sanity” at this point. He knew only that he wanted to go to sleep, or drift here in the blackness, and never wake up again. That was all he wished for himself.

But the force was relentless. He vaguely remembered that it had been relentless in forcing pain on him, too.

And then he was back together, and he opened his mouth and *screamed*. At once, a pale hand clamped over his lips, and a voice murmured into his ear, “I will be displeased if you cry out. You would not like to displease me, would you?”

Connor shut his eyes. He remembered, now—remembered how Voldemort had captured him, and what he'd used him for. His stomach contracted in a dry heave, but that had become a useless reflex by now. Nothing could *change* what he'd done. He could not go back to being what he had been, and it was ten to one whether Harry would ever look at him with anything but pity again, or whether Parvati would welcome him to her bed.

“You are not healed,” Voldemort whispered into his ear. “I do not need that from you. But you are sane again. So many times as you rupture, that many times I will bring you back. Legilimency is the art of dominating the mind.” He was silent for a long moment, and his fingers stroked Connor's cheek like the touch of mildew or spiderwebs. Connor moaned a little. He had that much strength left.

And then Voldemort's hand drifted back, and he smiled at Connor. His front teeth resembled a viper's fangs. Connor wondered if that was a new modification, or just a trait he had never noticed before. It wasn't like he had come face-to-face with the Dark Lord that often.

No, that's Harry's job.

Sickness roiled through Connor, that he could be so close to his enemy and be so useless, but he didn't show it. He just watched Voldemort, and after a moment Voldemort turned away from him and held up his hand. An invisible rope yanked Connor into the air and tugged him after Voldemort as he paced towards the burrow's entrance. Connor watched shadows move along with them, the currents of the Dark Lord's power.

“Come,” Voldemort whispered. “Let us prepare to welcome your brother.”

Harry had expected questions from Snape and Draco when he appeared. It seemed, though, that the force with which he Apparated in shut them up. That, and the magic churning around him, he had to concede. Since he had swallowed the latest burst of the magic that bound the soul shard to Voldemort's body, he had become even stronger.

Strong enough to take the bastard down?

Yes.

He looked at Snape, who stood with a potions vial in one hand as though he had intended to force it down Harry's throat and now could not, and at Draco, whose mouth was open, and said, calmly, “Henrietta is dead. She sacrificed herself for the final Horcrux, and I destroyed Evan Rosier, whose body it hid in, and swallowed the soul-piece itself. She had brought me there so that I could be close when the Horcrux was vulnerable, but not interfere with the sacrifice. It is quite possible that we may owe the salvation of our world to her. And now I can kill Voldemort, and I know where he is, since he foolishly chose to reveal his hiding place to me. Come with me, both of you. You should be there to see it happen.”

Snape's fingers clenched so hard around the potions vial that Harry thought it would shatter. Draco made a hungry sound and took three steps across the floor of the bedroom, seizing his shoulders and bringing Harry's mouth to his. Harry shared an open-

mouthing a kiss with him for a moment, then pulled back and bit down as hard as he could at Draco's lower lip. Draco cried out, but when he pulled back from Harry, he looked far more dazed than upset.

"Don't do that again," he whispered, "unless you want to finish what you've started before we go and find your brother."

"Not now," said Harry, a dark fire growing within him and changing his voice to something he scarcely recognized. "But later? Oh, yes, Draco. I think we can."

The dark fire surged up, filling him, sweeping every single limb with a spike of obsidian in which frozen lava glittered. Harry resisted the urge to tip back his head and howl like a werewolf, because he thought that would upset Snape, but he did lift his lip to show his teeth and snarl a little.

I am going to kill him. He doesn't know that we took his last Horcrux from him, and he is ready to die.

Harry Apparated both Draco and Snape with him to Godric's Hollow, because he was the only one who knew what the house was liable to look like now. And, indeed, when they landed on the hill next to it, he could see that not much had changed. The shattered walls where he and his brother, their parents and Sirius and Remus, had once dwelled and played and loved gaped at the sky still, and the ground rolled up to meet them at the edge of a broken wall. The only visible change was a softly blossoming garden on one ridge, which had probably been Indigena's. Of course, Voldemort had had no need to repair the house for himself. He had dug an underground sanctuary, like the serpent he was.

Harry knew without being told that the chamber where Voldemort kept his brother would be under the bedroom where he and Connor had slept as children, the room where Voldemort had entered to make Harry his magical heir and mark both him and Connor with their scars. The place where it all began.

For a moment, the edge of a thought about that night teased Harry, trying to connect with something else in his brain. But it flared and vanished when he saw Voldemort striding out to meet him, an incongruous sight, like a strutting carrion crow, beneath the mild gray sky of a day in March. Something floated behind him, and paused just inside the entrance to the burrow. Harry's heart seized up. That was Connor.

But so angry was he that he did not have to think about what he would do first, or pause and gape at Connor, or call his brother's name. He had come to do one thing, and one thing only. And Voldemort halted and stood there, smiling at him, so confident of his own invulnerability, so secure in the idea that Harry had not destroyed his last Horcrux and the Hufflepuff Cup was still in Rosier's possession.

Harry had sometimes pictured giving a grand speech when he defeated Voldemort, asking him if he was ready to die.

But, given what he had done to Connor and how badly Harry wanted to take his brother away from there, he found he had no heart for an announcement. He didn't pause to watch Voldemort's gleeful glances at Snape and Draco, either. He simply lifted a hand and spoke the spell he could finally speak, the spell he had used once before in the Chamber of Secrets and had no luck with, waiting for the moment when Voldemort's face changed from glee to panic.

"Avada Kedavra."

The green light filled the air around his palm, and then flashed away, traveling so fast that Harry wondered if Voldemort's face would have *time* to change expression before it reached him.

The answer seemed to be no, because his expression was the same when the green light reached him.

The beam struck him—

And faded away.

Voldemort began to laugh.

Harry took a step back. Ground and air danced around him, sky and earth, and he could not keep his footing, could not cry out his brother's name or a plea against the unfairness of the universe, could not *breathe*.

"No," he said, or thought he said. Or perhaps Draco or Snape said it. Or perhaps Connor called it, in a voice like a seagull's. The

roar of the sea seemed to overwhelm Harry's ears for a moment, and he nearly did not hear the words Voldemort was speaking to him.

"What will you never do, Harry?" he said softly. "*Never* do? Killing me would be very easy. But you cannot complete the harvest of my soul. You have not paid enough attention to the beginning, and that will take the end away from you. You have not found the third. You do not *know*." Deep triumph flashed in his eyes.

And then his magic began to rise, wave on wave, roaring like the sea itself, challenging Harry, tireless depths of darkness. Harry knew he could not fight it, not yet, not now, and not with Snape and Draco vulnerable behind him.

He went on staring, though, unable to move, because he did not—

And then he *understood*.

His scream ripped the air as he Apparated himself, Snape, and Draco away, and Voldemort's laughter followed him, deep and mocking.

What will you never do, Harry?

The Lord Voldemort had seen despair in his heir's eyes before he Apparated.

For the first time in seventeen years, he was content.

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Chapter Seventy-Eight: Standing, Look to the End

The moment he landed back in his bedroom at Silver-Mirror with Draco and Snape, Harry broke from them. He headed for the library; they could think that he was studying summoning spells or a way to kill a Dark Lord who was immortal, if they wanted. At the moment, he did not care.

He slammed the door behind him with magic, and put locking and warding spells around it that Jing-Xi would have had trouble getting through. Then he bowed his head and wrapped it in his arms as he dropped to the floor. Short, muffled screams burst from his mouth, cries of pain he could no more stifle than he could have grown wings and flown to the moon.

Connor was the last Horcrux.

Chains of understanding, long buried beneath the earth of his mind, burst into being, ripping his view of Voldemort and his brother up and setting the pieces down in a new, jagged pattern. He could not doubt his conclusion. It made too much sense.

Piece after piece after piece tumbled into place in his mind with a click and a clack and a thunk like fire.

Lady Death had shown the number seven to Regulus when he asked after Horcruxes. Regulus had assumed it meant six Horcruxes and one piece left for Voldemort—seven shards of soul.

"Death showed me the number seven. That makes sense. Seven is a magically powerful number. He split his soul into seven shards- one each for six Horcruxes, and one for himself."

Oh, yes, it made sense, Harry thought, with his understanding eating him like acid. But it had only been an *assumption*. It could as easily have meant seven Horcruxes, but Regulus had not interpreted it that way, and everyone else, guided by the way he thought, hadn't interpreted it like that, either.

The tide of comprehension and bitterness swept him up and on.

The bird had tried to show Harry the locations of Horcruxes, and Lady Death had done the same thing for Regulus. One of them was the desk that had contained the Ravenclaw wand, one the burrow where at the time Voldemort had kept the Hufflepuff Cup, one the shack where Slytherin's shade and the ring had waited, and one—

One had been Hogwarts.

Where, at the time, both the Sword of Gryffindor *and* Connor had been.

Harry was crying hard enough that the skin around his eyes felt stretched and swollen, but he could not stop, either weeping or thinking. More and more came springing out of the darkness like a clawed creature, dragging the past into the harsh and unforgiving light, making sense of Voldemort's actions in a way that no other explanation could have.

The Stone had said that there was a place in Harry's aura for a third person, someone connected to both him and Voldemort. And Harry, in going through the Imbolc ritual and reliving in his alternate world the night when Voldemort had come to Godric's Hollow, had seen the Killing Curses flash, connecting him, Voldemort, and Connor in a bent triangle. That was the idea that had almost managed to scratch its way into his head when he was at the house a few minutes ago.

A triangle. The third. Someone else bound to this endless turning of soul and magic, by his blood bond to Harry and the fact that Voldemort had lodged a shard of soul behind Connor's scar.

The part of Harry's mind that tried to deny reality asked frantically, *But wouldn't we have sensed something amiss with Connor? Wouldn't Voldemort's evil have manifested itself in him somehow? How can he be the Horcrux then? The others all felt evil.*

Harry began to laugh bitterly, and he could not stop. Connor's compulsion gift. Where had it come from? It could be inherited, but neither Lily nor James had had much evidence of it in their family line.

But Voldemort was a compeller.

Harry had once half-entertained the idea that Connor was Voldemort's magical heir, too, only taking the one magical gift that Harry himself did not bear. But, yes, it could have been the shard of soul stirring in Connor, expressing its evil the only way it knew how. Merlin knew it had certainly reacted strongly to the tutelage of Sirius, and especially Voldemort in Sirius's body, and Tom Riddle, when he vanished into Connor's head in second year, had been able to wield it like a veritable sword. If the connection between them was not Connor being Voldemort's magical heir—and surely he would have pulled on the Dark Lord's magic, too, if that was the case—then what was it? A Horcrux connection would serve.

Tom Riddle.

Harry closed his eyes and fell into the memory of the Chamber. The silent self reared again above the younger Dark Lord, having frozen Connor into a statue, and Harry could hear the words he spoke then.

“Not him. Never him. It was you, it must have been, and the nature of our connection—“

That had been the moment when Riddle discovered that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived; he had assumed before that that Connor was, and that he could only use Harry's scar at all because of Harry's connection to Connor. Harry had assumed that “the nature of our connection” referred to that stunning moment, too late, when Riddle recognized his true enemy.

But what if it had meant that he recognized Connor as a Horcrux, and only in that moment, too late to do anything about it?

Tom Riddle had been a rather immature and thoughtless shard of the Dark Lord's soul, Harry thought, with a speed and clarity that astonished him. *Click and clack and thunk* went the pieces of his mind.

The one they had faced at the end of third year had been an older version of Voldemort, cannier and more experienced. And he had threatened to kill Draco and Snape, had delighted in describing to Harry throughout the corrupted justice ritual how he would torture them.

He had said he would keep Connor alive.

“Why, I have been training him these past three months. It would be a shame to let such a well-trained and natural compeller go to waste. Imperio should remove any obstinate moral fixations he has, and then I have a follower skilled in doing Dark magic.”

Yes. A follower with a piece of himself inside him. Harry wondered if Voldemort had shivered with delight and irony when he called Connor a natural compeller.

Click sang the puzzle pieces.

Connor had flared with white light at the end of their first year, when Voldemort attacked him in Quirrell's body. Harry had thought it was his natural purity that saved him. Snape had assumed it was Harry's love. But while a willing sacrifice might very well create such a protection, Harry had not given up his life. He had lain there helpless while Quirrell attacked Connor.

And then there had been the white light that flared around Connor when the shard of Tom Riddle tried to attack him in McGonagall's office.

Harry had not been able to find information like this, because books on Horcruxes were so rare, but he wondered if it would be impossible for two shards of a soul to destroy each other, for Horcrux to be wielded against Horcrux, and if there was a book somewhere that described the reaction when that nearly happened as a flare of white, shadowless, pure light.

Clack sang the puzzle pieces.

Voldemort—the piece of Voldemort Harry had faced again and again, the man holding his brother captive now—must have known what Connor was from that confrontation at the end of first year. After that, he had not tried to kill him.

Oh, he had endangered his life. He had sent Rabastan to cast the Severing Curse at him during the Second Task of the Triwizard Tournament. But he could easily have ordered his follower to use the Killing Curse, if Connor's life wasn't important to him, if he wanted to bring despair to and break Harry.

He had used the spell during their fifth year that would have locked Connor in a dreaming coma, unable to come out unless a Marked Death Eater felt genuine willingness to help him, but that spell would not have killed him.

Connor had run into the midst of an attacking vampire hive, but none of them had attacked him.

When Voldemort tested his control over Evan Rosier by having him lure Connor out of Hogwarts during their sixth year and to Hawthorn's house, Indigena Yaxley had appeared in time to defend Connor and prevent Rosier from killing him—and Harry was willing to bet Indigena Yaxley knew all about the Horcruxes.

And Voldemort had Connor now, torturing him endlessly, but always healing him.

Thunk, sang the puzzle pieces, and rolled to a stop.

What will you never do, Harry?

Kill my brother, he answered Voldemort, and lifted his head, eyes dry and staring into the distance.

He remembered the long incantation Voldemort had cast over Connor early on in the torture session, before Snape could force the Dreamless Sleep down his throat. Harry had not recognized the spell, and had discounted it when it appeared to have no immediate effect, more concerned with the other things that Voldemort did to Connor in the name of hurting him. But he would wager, now, that the spell was an Unassailable Curse, insuring that his last Horcrux could not be destroyed without a willing sacrifice. Even if Harry had the strength of will to kill his brother, someone else would still have to die to make it possible.

It was no wonder that Voldemort was so confident. Harry might be able to delay going to Connor, for a little while, because Draco had asked him to.

He could never kill him, any more than he could kill Draco.

The world might fall under the reign of darkness, and still Harry could not willingly harm him.

Voldemort has—

And then, he stopped. All the breath rushed out of his lungs, as it had yesterday when he first struggled under the pain of what was happening to Connor, and he stared, while the puzzle pieces shifted twice and reoriented into a new pattern.

Voldemort had trapped him with what he would never do.

But he was notoriously bad at estimating what Harry *would* do.

And there was a way. Small and nimble, creeping around the edges of what was possible and permissible, but there *was* a way to destroy the Horcrux and yet not have to kill his brother.

It would even fulfill the prophecies.

Harry wore a small smile that he knew held no joy. He rose to his feet and gave a rippling stretch, arms over his head, and a small nod. He could do this. He would do this. He would tell Snape and Draco he knew why Voldemort could not be killed, and tie it to the prophecy. The prophecy mandated that an elder stand at his right shoulder, didn't it? But it had to be a different elder each time, and Snape and Draco had already both fulfilled the role once, with Falco and Dumbledore respectively. Harry could not kill Voldemort until he brought along someone else who loved him. Peter would do.

It sounded perfect. It sounded beautiful.

It was a lie.

But they would not know that.

Harry let out a soft breath, and went to unlock the door and comfort his father and lover, who were no doubt frantic. He would explain the need to wait a while before they left, to brew some rather specialized healing potions for Connor. And it was true that his brother would probably die if they simply tried to remove him from Voldemort's lair.

He didn't think he could have done this, had his Occlumency pools still been in place. He would have considered things too objectively. But his emotions were free now, and Harry knew exactly the level of guilt he could live with.

I'll make myself human past the doubt, he told the prophecy echoing in his head. *Don't you worry about that.*

The dogs-head in his left palm burned softly, as if in response, or promise.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Brewing

Three hippogriff feathers, shredded into three parts each.

Cut and cut and cut, and the hippogriff feathers existed. Toss them into the potion. Watch them float, drift across the surface, while a red stone cut into his palm and he forced all the thoughts of what he wanted done into it. The stone grew warm with magic, and he had to concentrate to stop it from exploding.

Impart the stone with your magical essence.

Done, and *toss*, and the potion spat steam the color of lava and foamed and danced against the cauldron. Put up a ward around the cauldron, *just* in case it spilled. It could not spill, not now. Contain it. Brew it. Remember the discipline Snape had taught him, embedded in breaths and body.

The chips of stone must be identical.

They were. Oh, they were. Twin stones for twins. Cradle it tight, think of what he wanted to do, and watch the bubbles leap.

Leap, and the potion ate of the stone, and settled back into place as if thinking. Its bubbles floated above the surface now. Where was the largest one? *There*, and it tasted of him and fell back into the cauldron with a faint pop when he punctured it with one finger.

The potion must have the breath of the body.

Lean in. Blow. The potion singing to him, singing like a little boy finding frogs in a pond on a spring morning. Changing color, silver now, smug silver, languid silver, silver of light that defended one Horcrux from another.

Watch for the maelstrom. It must have one of the brewer's hairs.

Pluck it forth, the smallest pain he had endured that day. Watch. There was the whirlpool! And in the hair went, and the potion

appeared to turn upside-down, a smooth silver turtle shell extending above the rim of the cauldron.

The potion must taste one more time of skin and sweat.

A finger in. The dome trembled, and buckled, and then slid apart, halving itself, petals reaching out like a flower's. Then it settled, and he could move it into the vial waiting for it. Couldn't have two; they would suspect something. But he could, and did, place a red line of magic inside the vial, invisible unless one looked closely, dividing exactly half from exactly half.

Done.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy-Nine: And Death Is a Sleep

Draco did not really like the look in Harry's eyes when he came out of the impromptu potions lab Snape had constructed on the second floor of Silver-Mirror. His face was—not sane. And he slipped a vial into his robe pocket as Draco watched, a vial full of a silver potion that looked familiar. Draco frowned. *That's not Snape's Imperius potion, is it? He can't be planning on using that, can he?*

And then he dismissed the idea, because Harry was *vates*, and he would never use compulsion like that, whether it was in the form of a curse, the compulsion gift, or a potion. And Harry was smiling at him, his eyes so bright that Draco could almost pretend he was all there.

Harry would need healing in the wake of what had happened, of course, just as Connor did. But now they were going to defeat the Dark Lord.

Draco could hardly think of it; his thoughts charged up to the idea and then stopped as if at a wall. He had lived all his life under the shadow of the Dark Lord; the tales of him were the first he could remember Lucius whispering about, rather than simply telling, and that had increased the attraction of them to a child greedy for secrets. Draco had lived with the notions that he would serve him, that his father would serve him, and that he would fight Voldemort all along.

And now, he was going to be *destroyed*?

It seemed too real to be believed.

Sane or not, Harry was taking them along: Peter, Draco, and Snape. The others had been told enough to content them, but Harry had very firmly refused to take anyone else. Draco actually understood that, this time. Peter was necessary to the prophecy, and he and Snape could not bear to be parted from Harry, but taking too many people would just put them all in danger. They could not hope to overcome Voldemort by strength of magic. It needed Harry and Peter and the prophecy. And if Harry wanted to brew healing potions for Connor, the way he had done, then that was his right. At least, if Voldemort used his dying moments to inflict some horrible strike on Connor, then he was much less likely to die with Harry's healing potions right there.

Draco wondered what he should say to his brother-in-law when he saw him again, and then shrugged. He would find the right thing in the moment when it happened, and not before.

A hand smoothed over his arm, and he looked up into Harry's face. "Ready?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded. "It's going to be strange when we get out of there," he said, and tried to laugh. "Who do you think is going to react worse to the news of Voldemort's disappearance? All those people who still secretly sympathized with the Death Eaters? Or the Light wizards who won't have an enemy to fight any more?"

"Probably the Pact," said Harry, and Draco swallowed what he'd meant to say next, because, good Merlin, Harry's eyes were green. "I love you, Draco."

"I love you, too," Draco responded, wondering what had brought this suddenly on.

Harry leaned forward and kissed him. It was the softest, gentlest, most passionate kiss Draco could ever remember them sharing. He was still staring at Harry when his partner pulled away, but Harry had turned to talk to Snape and Peter, and didn't seem to notice.

I hope there are more kisses like that in our future, Draco decided, dazedly. I want them.

He would consider, later, that it had been meant as a way to say goodbye.

Emotions raced through Harry's head, colliding with the sides of his skull, softening the world around him, making him see everything through his haze. It was rather like his dream of the sea, where there had been a black glass box that contained him and the water, and the grief had pounded outside. Outside him, now, were all the people who thought differently than he did, and doubtless would tell him he was mad.

Inside were him, and his selfishness.

Slytherins were selfish. It was one of the defining traits of the House, at least according to the wild Dark when it had accepted Draco's Declaration. And that was the reason Harry had been Sorted there in first year, he now believed: he really hadn't cared about anything but serving Connor, which, though it was an unselfish end in itself, involved him in a rather suffocating and constricted world as far as people other than his brother went.

As it began, so it ends.

In more than one way, Harry thought, while they landed on the edge of the ruined wall containing Godric's Hollow. He had wrapped all of them in the *Extabesco plene*, so that Voldemort's senses and magic could not detect them. They could, however, still see and otherwise sense each other.

In truth, he did not believe they needed it. He believed that Voldemort would have let Harry walk openly into the burrow and come to his brother, because Voldemort did not think Harry would have the strength to kill Connor. It *was* true that Harry might have brought along someone intended as a willing sacrifice—he glanced sideways at Peter—and that could break the Unassailable Curse Voldemort had cast on Connor. But then there would still be the problem of getting the shard of soul out of Connor's body.

The example of Evan Rosier suggested that a shard embedded in a living body would not leave it, had no reason to leave it, unless that body was killed. They preferred bodies to objects. Harry could ask Peter to die, but he would still have had to kill his brother to make the shard of soul fly, and that he would not do, would never do.

It was too bad that Voldemort underestimated him in other ways, Harry thought, clinically detached. Really too bad.

His hand brushed against the vial of Switching Potion in his pocket as they walked towards the entrance of the burrow. Harry could feel wards plucking at his skin, but it was easy enough to shunt them aside. They were confused, anyway, by the distinct similarity between his magic and Voldemort's. Soon enough they stood staring down into the vast hole in the dirt. Harry could see steps if he squinted, and make out footprints in them. He wondered whose footprints they were. Voldemort's alone? Indigena's? Had Connor walked here?

You will walk up them, brother. You will walk away. I have sacrificed too much already. I can be selfish too, and with my emotions free, it's so much easier to be that way, to be human. I'm tired. I don't want to see more sacrifices. I don't want to see more people die, and I can't see you die, and I can't see Draco die, or Snape, or Peter, or anyone else.

Now and then, like a muffled thump against the glass from the part of him that was still sane, came a reminder that he was a bit mad. A *bit*, Harry corrected himself. He had a plan. It was a good one.

"Shall we descend?" Draco asked at last, when they'd stood there for some minutes in uncomfortable silence.

Harry nodded. "I'm not sure where Connor is, or Voldemort," he lied. He knew Connor would be slightly to the north of them, under the ruined bedroom where they'd both been marked, and he could feel Voldemort at the end of the tunnel of magic stretching between them, in a burrow that squatted to the west and south. "We should go down and feel for them. Maybe I can sense something then."

He would have to be careful, he thought, as he descended the stairs, shielding Draco, Snape, and Peter. Depending on the conformation of the tunnel, he might have to take drastic measures to keep them from following him.

The healing potions in his pocket bumped against his ribs, *clink, clack, rattle*, and the Switching Potion, larger and more majestic than they were, seemed to be breathing. Harry wondered if such perceptions were part of his madness. He didn't much care if they were. His emotions were free now, he was human, and that was what the prophecy and all the people around him had wanted, wasn't it?

As it turned out, no drastic measures were needed. The tunnel in front of them split two ways, one leading to the room where Harry knew Connor lay, the other turning into an alcove which Voldemort had probably used for storage at some point. Harry smiled slightly, and his magic began to stir around him. He could feel Voldemort watching him, confident, curious to see what he would do.

You are going to die, Harry thought, but quietly, since he didn't know what Voldemort might be able to pick up with Legilimency.

Abruptly, he stiffened and stared into the alcove, as if he saw something. It worked for two of them. Snape and Peter both stepped forwards into it, wands drawn. Draco stayed by his shoulder.

He was always the difficult one, Harry thought with fond exasperation, remembering the child who had clung to his side like a burr in his first year to prevent him from associating with Gryffindors. He lifted a hand, and his magic responded to his order, howling around Draco as a wind and giving him a gentle but firm shove after Peter and Snape.

Draco stared at him. They all stared at him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly. "I love you. Goodbye."

And then he conjured a stone wall across the front of the alcove, sealing it off. Air could flow under it and around the sides, so they wouldn't suffocate, but there was no way for so much as a finger to fit through a crack. Harry then carefully cast an Unassailable Curse on the wall. Only a Light wizard, or the Light itself, would be able to surpass it, crack the wall, and let the three of them out—and it couldn't be someone on the inside, which meant Peter couldn't tear it down. That effectively protected them from Voldemort, who was Dark in every sense of the word. Harry was confident that Connor himself, or someone else who could decipher the notes he'd left in his bedroom on a half-hidden scrap of paper, would come eventually and let them out.

Draco's fist hit the wall. "*Harry*," he said, with so much misery in his voice that Harry had to close his eyes for a moment. "What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing?"

"Connor's the final Horcrux," Harry said calmly. "And I don't intend to let him die. I'm going to take care of that."

Shocked silence. Harry turned up the tunnel that led to his brother.

"*Harry*," Peter said.

"Harry!" Snape called.

Draco's response was a wordless wail.

Harry set his sights forward, and trotted. He'd done everything for them that he could. He had to do something for his brother now, and for himself.

The Switching Potion bumped and bumped and bumped against him, at least until he gripped the vial to hold it still and make sure it wouldn't break.

Harry was indeed glad that he'd brought the healing potions when he saw his brother. Connor lay on the dirt without a chain or rope—speaking further to Voldemort's scornful confidence, that Harry would never destroy his brother—but he had fingers still badly broken and harshly reset, and his limbs twitched in small, regular convulsions. Harry knelt down beside him, dropped the *Extabesco plene*, and smoothed a hand over his brow, over the scar that concealed the Horcrux. Connor shivered and opened his eyes.

The tears in his eyes said clearly that he thought he was seeing a dream. "Harry?" he whispered.

"Here, brother." Harry had never known that his own voice could sound so calm, so steady. He tipped a few of the healing potions down Connor's throat, until his breathing eased and he could sit up. Connor leaned against the dirt wall. Harry put the rest of the healing potions carefully within his reach, and then drew out the Switching Potion. The red line in the middle separated half from half, and he nodded and uncorked the vial.

“Harry?” Connor whispered. “What are you doing?”

Harry ignored him for the moment. Now was not the time to let Connor talk him out of anything. He would explain once he was done, because his twin deserved to hear it, but not before.

He drank half of the potion, down to the red line.

The effect was immediate, though very odd—not at all like the other times he had used it. Then again, he’d never been the one to whom the dreams or knowledge was transferred. He felt another tunnel open across his brow, this one connecting his scar to Connor’s, and a mighty *yank* made his head bob forward. Then his mind filled with the heavy sense that he could compel people if he wanted to. Harry let out a slow breath. That, of course, was not a true compulsion gift, but just the form that this shard of Tom Riddle’s soul had taken.

“Harry?” Connor repeated, insistently.

Harry looked up at him, and smiled as gently as he could under the circumstances. He had the feeling that it was more exhausted than tender. “You were a Horcrux, Connor,” he said quietly. “That’s why I couldn’t kill Voldemort, why he prevented his Death Eaters from killing you, and why he took you. It happened that night he came hunting us in Godric’s Hollow. A shard of soul became embedded in you.”

Connor stared at him with an open mouth, then whispered, “*How?*”

Harry shrugged. His head really did feel heavier. “Ask the prophecy. Ask the odd combination of magic going on in the room that night. My guess is that the Killing Curse he cast at you, and which got interrupted by my rebounded one, split his soul again, using *him* as both the murder victim and the source of the shard, and then the shard took the only available path it could and flew into you.”

Connor swallowed several times, then said, “But that means—that means—“ He stopped.

“It *did*,” Harry corrected him, taking pity. He would not make Connor say that he would have to die for the safety of the world. “I used the Switching Potion to transfer the Horcrux into myself.”

More silence. Harry thought it had been perhaps two minutes since he took the Potion now.

“*Why?*” Connor said, both a demand and a rebuke at once.

“Because I’m so damn tired of sacrifices.” Harry yawned. He would wait just a few more minutes, to say farewell to his twin and make sure that he understood the truth and what he needed to do, and then he would kill himself. He was looking forward to the sleep that awaited him. Perhaps there would be sounds of the sea, or beloved voices, but he would prefer soundless oblivion. “I couldn’t bear to see you die. Voldemort knows it. Even if I could bear to stand by and watch, say, Peter sacrifice himself to break the Unassailable Curse on you, we would still have to destroy your body to get the shard out so I could swallow it. I couldn’t kill you. But I can, quite willingly and happily, die. That will be the willing sacrifice that breaks the Curse, *and* the one that destroys the body so that the shard will have to flee.”

“And what if the shard just possesses me?” Connor demanded tensely. “I was its home for seventeen years.“ He shuddered as if he had swallowed something foul-tasting.

Harry laughed softly. “That won’t happen, Connor. When I die, my magic is going to snap right back to Voldemort. The shard will go with it, I think, drawn along by the sheer pull. Then Voldemort will have two pieces of his soul in the same body again, but no more Horcruxes. He can be killed.’ He lifted his head. The air was filling with sweet thunder. “The prophecy will insure it,” he added. “You’re the younger now, Connor, and you can kill Voldemort just like I could have. He’s a powerful wizard, but he’ll be mortal in a few moments. A successful Killing Curse will slay him just like anyone else.”

The prophecy, somewhat to Harry’s surprise, didn’t continue congealing. It hung in the air like a miasma instead, as if waiting for something. Harry frowned at a corner where it seemed strongest, wondering what it wanted.

“You *think*,” Connor said, voice like a whiplash. “What premise is that to hang the safety of the world on, Harry?”

“When otherwise we would have no chance at all? A very good one.” Harry started to lie down.

“What about everyone who needs you?” Connor demanded. “The magical creatures? Draco? Snape? Me?”

“I’ve done what I can for them,” said Harry, and lowered his head to rest on his hands. “Now I’ve run up against something I can’t do. It’s just like asking me to kill Draco to save the world. I can’t change what I am. But I can do this, Connor.” He sighed. His eyes wanted to droop shut, but he had a few more things to say first. “I will miss you. But I can’t go on now. I’ve finally learned to be human, just like the prophecy said.”

Prophecies, inevitably, run out, sang the line in his mind.

Connor was staring at him. His chest heaved as if he were struggling for air, but no sound escaped his mouth. His eyes were bright and very hollow.

“Snape, Peter, and Draco are trapped behind a wall down the corridor that only a Light wizard can break,” Harry said. “Your wand is in my robe pocket. I—“

Connor lunged.

Harry reared backwards instinctively, but it wasn’t him Connor was going for. He realized what it was too late.

Connor snatched the vial of Switching Potion, and gulped down the second half.

Harry didn’t know the voice with which he screamed. The burrow shook with it, though, and he thought he could hear Voldemort’s laughter as the Horcrux flew from his body back to Connor’s.

Connor’s hands were still moving. He picked up one of the healing potions lying beside him and dashed it down his throat.

The prophecies sang like wildfire. Three heavy weights whirled down, one right after the other, and landed like iron barbells in the corner.

Letters overrode his vision, information Harry remembered from *Medicamenta Meatus Verus*, where he had first discovered the Switching Potion.

There are three ways in which the Switching Potion is fatal. One is if another potion is consumed within five minutes of drinking half the draft.

Connor coughed.

Blood burst from his ears, and trickled down his cheeks in lazy patterns of red. Then another stream of blood answered from his nose. Connor sagged to the ground, and Harry could hear his internal organs rupturing, one after another.

But he was smiling.

Harry grasped his hand. “No,” he said, but it was the helpless noise of a child denied something it badly wanted.

Connor grinned up at him, and answered as if he had asked, “Why?” “Because the world needs you more than me, Harry. Merlin knows I love Parvati, I love my life, I love what I am—“ He broke off to cough. Red flecked his lips. He finished, with a determination that Harry could only stare at. “I love you. But I choose to lay it down, I choose to sacrifice it.” He touched Harry’s cheek with a trembling hand. “And that ought to take care of both the willing sacrifice and the body the Horcrux is hiding in, just as you said it would.”

The elder will stand at his right shoulder, loving him, but the younger will love the whole of the wizarding world...

Never, in all his dreams and his interpretations of the prophecy, had Harry imagined that one moment of loving the whole of the wizarding world—the kind of moment just long enough to contain one of Connor’s impulsive actions—might be the answer to the third round of the prophecy.

“I love you, Harry,” Connor said, steadily. “But this hurts as much as anything Voldemort did to me.” Harry heard something burst in his chest cavity, and Connor’s face went white. “Please,” he said. “Knock me unconscious now.”

Harry could not stop weeping, and he could not disobey his brother’s last request. “I love you,” he said, and touched Connor’s scar, and quietly shut down the center of his brain that kept him awake, so that he would not be aware and in the midst of pain when he died.

Connor smiled at him, and closed his eyes.

He did not open them again.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.

The shard of soul had indeed fled from Connor's body the moment he was dead. Harry had caught and shredded it like a bat, taking it apart down to the tendons, absorbing the magic inside him. He had no pity for things like this, things of Voldemort, not anymore.

Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.

He and Connor had indeed both been born here, at the end of July in 1980, to parents like that. They had entered the world only fifteen minutes apart.

He is the younger of two, and he shall have the power the Dark Lord knows not.

Connor indeed had loved. And Voldemort had never anticipated the power that could have, or he would have taken far greater measures to guard his last Horcrux than he had.

Harry's footsteps as he left the room where his brother lay dead were as soft as a leopard's.

For the elder is power, but the younger is power united with love.

No one had ever said that that power in the second phrase had to be magical power. It could be determination. Harry himself had used the Dark, not sheer magical power alone, to defeat Falco.

Harry passed the stone wall. He could hear that, ahead of him, Voldemort was no longer laughing. He did not appear to know what had happened. Or perhaps he simply assumed that he should have felt something more, if his Horcrux was really gone.

O guard him, O shield him, for the darkness through which he passes otherwise is vicious and hideous, and love has but a scant chance of surviving.

And it had been. Connor had been kidnapped and had nearly succumbed to insanity. And he had not survived.

The final tunnel gaped before Harry. He could feel his own magic rising, dark as Voldemort's, dark as deep water, violent as the sea in storm.

The elder will stand at his right shoulder, loving him, but the younger will love the whole of the wizarding world.

For one moment; Connor had loved the world that he thought needed Harry, and sacrificed himself and died before he could change his mind. But one moment had been enough.

Harry lifted his head and shook it. When he glanced to the right, the bird with claws on its wings and teeth in its beak hovered there. When he glanced to the left, a black dog with silver eyes tilted her head and looked wisely up at him.

Power to the right of me, death to the left of me, Harry thought, and stepped forward.

The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, and in so doing mark his heart.

Cause a heart-shaped scar, and give him a piece of his soul, such as Voldemort himself bore. Such a pity no one had ever thought of that interpretation.

Lady Death might have raised her voice like a hunting horn, to warn her prey they were coming. But she did not. This was the proper place for silence, and she moved in it, though every hair on her body bristled. Ahead of them waited one who had escaped her for far too long, Harry knew.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born as the seventh month dies.

The bird's wings were loud in the silence.

Harry came to the entrance of the room.

*Three on three the old one coils,
Three in its times, three in its choices.*

And yes, it had been. Draco and Harry, Snape and Harry, Harry and Connor. The prophecy could have made another choice even now, Harry knew: Peter and Connor, for example, or maybe Peter and Harry, if Harry had died and Peter had been the one to kill Voldemort. That had been the reason it had hesitated the way it had. Until the very last moment, the choice could have fallen either way, and it had had to wait to come true until Connor did something irrevocable.

With a soft snort, Harry wondered what a necromancer would have seen if trying to foresee his and Connor's deaths.

Something confusing, Lady Death said into his head, in a voice like cold dust.

*So much pain running without a halter,
More than is traded every day in gold.
Yet remember that even prophecies falter,
And it is up to human hands to hold*

*And cling together at the end of all things.
Prophecies will, inevitably, run out.
It is on humans to take up wings,
And makes themselves human past the doubt.*

Connor was human. Always human. Selfish, bratty, limited, ordinary, and capable of such sweetness and generosity as could stun you.

Three prophecies come true, all entangled, and Voldemort mortal now.

Harry stepped into the room.

Voldemort rose to face him. His power mounted around him, still grand, still great, still more than anything Harry could call. But he was confused, hesitating, having felt the prophecies but not knowing what they meant, or perhaps frightened by the sight of the great black hound at Harry's left side.

The hound belled.

The bird shrieked.

Harry said, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

The green light blazed and beamed between them. No time for Voldemort to change his expression, nothing that he could do to alter things, and no time to make another Horcrux.

No time for anything at all.

The green light struck home. Voldemort fell dead. Harry stared at him, and wondered if it could all be over, as simply as that—though the madness whispering in the back of his mind, caused by the torture of his brother and heightened by the loss of his brother, said it could not be.

And then he fell to his knees, screaming.

Voldemort's power had begun the transfer to his magical heir.

It came upon Harry in thin lines, stretching from claw-shaped marks on Voldemort's forehead and shoulders, arms and hands and body, to him. Wounds flared on his body in the matching places—the scratches that the bird had inflicted on him during his fifth and sixth years, Harry remembered dreamily. The bird itself flew back and forth over the flowing magic, cawing and cooing happily. *Love, love, love!* it said into Harry's head. *Love you now!*

So much magic. Harry had never imagined so much magic. As the tunnel contracted, on and on it poured, not a flood of water but a flood of pebbles, then a flood of boulders, then a flood of darkness that lay in caves and had never seen the light, intent on crushing him flat with its evil and tainting his power.

But Harry had lived in his body for seventeen years, and with the powerful magic that Voldemort had accidentally granted him when he shattered Harry's barriers with the Killing Curse for sixteen. He had a core of his own magic, untouched, untapped by the shared connection, and loyal to him only.

No! I say no! he shouted, and wielded his will and the absorbere gift against the magic, constraining it, swallowing and crushing it, forcing it to do as he said.

The power roared and romped and blazed around him, and the fragile balance in Harry's mind tipped. He felt his sanity fall and smash like a little clay figurine on rocks.

He scrambled to his feet, aware that the magic moved with him, but still sulkily, still slyly, as if it would strain to win control over him the moment it could. Harry knew he was probably the most powerful wizard in the world now.

Nothing could have mattered less to him.

No magic in the world could pierce the barriers of death to call his brother back.

He raised his head, and his arms. Wings opened behind him, glittering black things edged in horns and spikes, and with a wordless cry he sprang skyward—

And was *elsewhere*, on gray sand where waves dashed up to meet him with an equally wordless roar.

On a beach in Northumbria.

Harry cast himself down, and gave himself to the tumble of magic and madness and rioting inside him. Love was a shard to cling to, but it was very small, a raft of ice against a sea of lava. He would have to bring himself back if he were to come back.

Harry closed his eyes, and curled in on himself, and wept like something dying, and the sea answered with cry after rushing cry of pain.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Light of Ruin

Draco's knuckles bled from where he'd dashed them against the wall over and over again. His mind didn't feel much better: scraped raw by the sheer effort to comprehend what was happening, and the certainty that he knew nearly nothing and, at the same time, that he knew enough to mourn.

He's gone to sacrifice himself. All the work that we put into making him human, all of the man I loved, given up for his brother—

It would have been easy to hate Connor then, even given all he'd suffered, but it was easier to hate the fact that Harry still felt this way, inclined to die.

And then Peter and Snape cried out simultaneously, and sagged to their knees. Draco opened his mouth to ask what was wrong, even as he drew his wand with one hand. His body seemed to think Voldemort had come to stand outside the wall and that they would have no choice but to fight him.

It was lucky he had one free hand, so that he could fling his arm across his eyes when the light started.

It was a golden-white, piercing, stern kind of radiance. It opened in streaks and gaps through the Dark Marks on both men's arms, and chewed through the flesh. Draco could smell hair singeing. When he did force himself to look straight ahead and see through to the source, he saw the light scraping the Dark Marks as black scraps like burned paper off to either side, and stretching itself outward in a molten birth.

Then it vanished, or migrated from Peter's and Snape's arms to the wall. They knelt there, and Draco stood, in silence, staring, trying to grasp the fact that Voldemort was gone. He *had* to be, or else what would have happened to the Dark Marks?

Then a golden claw hooked over the top of the stone wall and dragged it down.

Draco gasped as light like a thousand *Lumos* charms struck his eyes for a moment, but then it faded, and he stood in a dark tunnel flaring with afterimages. He heard Snape and Peter follow him hesitantly out of the alcove, over the tumbled stone, so surprised that fear had been left behind them.

I don't know what happened, Draco thought. But I need to find out.

"I'll take this tunnel," he said quietly, indicating the one in front of them. "You explore other ways."

Though Peter, and especially Professor Snape, probably would have argued against letting him out of their sight under any ordinary circumstances, these were not ordinary circumstances. Or perhaps they were simply as anxious to find Harry as he was. They nodded, and turned towards a massive, arched tunnel that led to the south.

Draco bent and followed the faint traces of Harry's footprints in the dust. He ignored the fact that there was a set coming back the other way, with odd, faint marks beside it like the pawprints of a dog. He could not allow himself to hope until he saw what lay in the room at the end of the tunnel.

Draco was thus the one to find Connor's body.

He saw black hair around the corner, and stopped suddenly. It was only by drawing on the coldness of his father's voice—*Malfoys are not cowards*—and his mother's—*Never allow fear to cripple you, Draco, for it means you are not being true to yourself*—together could he go forward.

And then he saw Connor lying in the dirt with blood splayed down his face, and the strength went out of his legs. He dropped to his knees, and looked for a long time. He looked at the empty potions vials next to his brother-in-law, and that blood, and the set of footprints that led out of the room.

And the faint tingle of magical power in the air, power that he knew well.

Draco closed his eyes. "You prevented Harry from sacrificing himself," he said. "I don't know how you did it, but thank you." He hesitated for a long moment, then whispered, "I'm sorry."

Well, he *hadn't* known what would be appropriate to say to his brother-in-law until he saw him again, after all.

A muffled footfall sounded behind him. Draco glanced over his shoulder, wondering if he would see Harry standing there.

The gryphon of the Light, feathers all aglow with the same white-golden radiance that had illuminated the Dark Marks, bowed its eagle's beak towards him and watched him with brilliant eyes.

The Light pulled the wall down, Draco thought, paralyzed, staring back, though it was like staring into the sun. Peter said that only a Light wizard on the outside of the wall could remove it—or the Light itself. I suppose now we know which one it was. But what in the world is it doing here?

And then he was glad that he hadn't asked the question aloud, because the answer was obvious.

His face flaming, he moved aside and allowed the Light access to Connor's body.

The enormous creature flattened as it crept past him, until the moment when it stood above Connor. Then its eyes softened, in a way that Draco didn't understand—how could an eagle look compassionate?—and it bent its head to rub its beak against him. The white wings rose, and wrapped around the corpse. Draco bowed his head. He knew the Light was probably gathering Connor, to take him home, and he felt uneasy and uncomfortable and awed being so close to the force Connor had been Declared to.

Something crossed his face, a burning shadow. He looked up, and saw one claw hovering above him.

The claw descended.

The nails scraped through Draco like light, and, for one moment, he understood. He shared the morals of a Light wizard. He

understood what would make someone Declare to the Light.

One could limit oneself voluntarily, so that other people could have freedom and pleasure and beautiful things. They deserved to have them, too, didn't they? And one could lay down one's life so that other people could live. And one could dance between free will on the one side and order on the other, and make it one's life work to reconcile them in a pattern of both joy and beauty.

Draco emerged from that strange experience shaking his head, as the morals left him like water from a sieve. He shivered, and wrapped his arms around himself. He was glad the Light had not forced him to change his mind. He did not want to think differently. He was Dark, Declared, and that was all there was to it.

But he knew the Light had given him a gift nonetheless. For a moment, he had comprehended why Connor had done this.

And, more lastingly, he now understood Harry in a way he doubted he would have achieved otherwise.

He sat back as the gryphon rose on its hind legs, the lion's paws, and spread its wings. Its claws clutched something shining and indistinct, perhaps vaguely human-shaped, close to its breast. Its cry rang out, the eagle's scream breaking into the lion's roar halfway through, the sound of mingled pain and triumph.

Then it blasted straight up through the roof of the burrow, and dirt shook down and covered Draco. But when he looked up through the hole thus left, he saw the stars.

Connor, he noticed when he looked back at him, had a smile on his face.

Snape and Peter met him in the middle of the tunnel near the collapsed stone wall, dazed enlightenment on their faces.

"Voldemort is dead," Snape said simply. Peter looked too overwhelmed to talk.

Draco nodded. He'd worked out the story now, finally remembering the silver color of the Switching Potion. He held up the vial that had contained it, and Snape at once narrowed his eyes and snatched it away.

"Connor's dead back there," Draco said. Peter closed his eyes, and Draco winced, wishing he'd found some gentler way to break it. But, well, Snape had *had* to know that it wasn't Harry. "Harry intended to switch the Horcrux into himself, I think, and perhaps he even managed it. But Connor took it *back*, and then—then he died. I think he drank a healing potion to do so."

"So where is Harry?" Snape asked.

Draco shook his head. "I don't know. But he probably fled after—after he inherited Voldemort's power and saw his brother die." He shuddered to imagine what Harry's mind might look like now, and then turned and made his way to the steps out of the burrow.

As if something in the earth itself had kept them from feeling it, now Draco could sense the enormous power bleeding from the north and west. It pulsed like a heart torn from the body. He shuddered again.

"He's in Northumbria," he said absently.

"How in the world do you know?" Snape demanded.

"I don't *know*," said Draco. "But I'm sure." He hesitated, wondering if he could approach Harry in this mood, and then straightened his shoulders. "We'll have to go to him," he said. "But carefully. We don't want to trigger a wizard that powerful into lashing out."

Snape nodded, and then no one really seemed to know what to say, so they stood silently there. The stars blazed overhead with more clarity than Draco remembered them ever having.

The Dark Lord is gone.

In the distance, an eagle cried.

And Draco saw Connor's bloody face and smiling mouth in his mind again, and thought, as he would never do again, *Farewell, brother.*

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty: All So Fair That Are Broken

Monika did not step back from her pool until she was quite sure that the interaction between Lord Riddle and his heir had ended—long moments after the pool had gone dark. She had enchanted it to record those kinds of interactions solely, and so it made sense that it would become obscure when one of them died, but Lord Riddle had had so many tricks to cheat death that Monika half expected the water to brighten to silver again.

It did not. This time, the man who called himself Voldemort was truly dead, and his magic had transferred to Harry.

Harry was the most powerful wizard in the world.

And weakened, emotionally insane, terribly vulnerable...

Monika did not hesitate. There was a way around the Pact's sanctions about going to Britain, and she knew what they were. She had prepared herself against such a day. She would create a sending of herself, a powerful glamour that would gradually fill in with her physical body, and place it on the beach where the pool had showed her the last vision of Harry—more than clear enough for Apparition. She still had a tapeworm of the kind that would steal magic for her. And even a third of that incredible power would be enough to insure that no member of the Pact after that could challenge her and force her to face any consequence of her actions. She would *be* a consequence. And the Pact mostly lived with what occurred. They would accept Harry's death—probably with more than one secretly grateful that the slayer of three Lords had gone out of the world—and her new status without fuss.

If they know what is good for them.

Monika smiled, and then began to chant the words and fuel the will that would create the sending for her.

A black wolf with green eyes and a silver lightning bolt scar looked into his face.

A green wolf with silver eyes and a black lightning bolt scar looked into his face.

A silver wolf—

No! No silver wolf. The silver he had seen was the gray color of the beach and the waves transmuted, and what he had thought was the wolf's howl was the laughter of gulls, springing around him like foam. Harry clenched his fists and screamed back. The laughter fell silent in startlement, and then the sea crept up the sand and licked at his boots like a servant. Harry knew it would do what he asked of it, did he but ask piercingly enough. He stretched out a shaking hand, which firmed when he felt the cold of the spray on his fingers.

The wolf had retreated a short distance away from him, to sit at his left shoulder. It could never stand at the right one. No one could stand at the right one without being terribly hurt and marked more than he should be. There was a prophecy about that. Give Harry a moment, and he would recall the wording.

But what if he didn't want to recall the wording? What if he wanted to lie here for the rest of his life, and feel the sea on his fingers?

His magic whispered eagerly that it could make it so. He might turn into a statue with nerves only in its hand, and no one would be able to approach that hand, which a sphere of pure white light would guard, but he could feel the sea, again and again, as long as he liked. It might disintegrate him into a mixture of sand and air and magic, but the hand would stay. It could move him from world to world, opening gates whenever he tired of the feel of one particular set of waters, while he need never move his body but could only stare into the sea.

This was the beach where he had come with—

And the sounds of the name formed in his mind, hard stop, soft vowels, loud nasals, and he screamed, the cry of a wild and lonely thing.

Wild and lonely things played in the corners of his mind, creatures that lived in the paths between Dark and Light, and which he would have had to glance away from the sea to acknowledge. The waves whispered their condolences for his loss. A slim dog, a lovely greyhound, came up out of the sea with a collar of salt on her neck and stood there, licking softly at his cheek, and the silver center of one palm, with a cold tongue. Then she turned into a woman, which had never happened before, and sat down beside him. Harry saw her through his magic, since his eyes would not turn away from staring in front of him. One side of her body lived and thrived, with healthy skin and a soft brown eye and shining white hair of a snow-like loveliness. The other side of her body was flesh scraped and burned raw, with a seamed half-lip parched raw by thirst, and wisps of hair that cracked as she moved, and an eye-socket filled with smashed jelly. In her living hand she held a dead rose, in the dead hand a live one.

Et in Arcadia ego, Lady Death said softly.

Harry knew the words. *Even in Arcadia, I am*. In the most perfect, beautiful, idyllic place on earth, Death lingered. He could not escape from it. She was the counterpart to life. He was what came when life ended, and there was no immortality, no turning away from it.

As Voldemort's death had proved, and Connor's—

Harry flung the name from him as he would a branding iron. It hurt far, far too much to contemplate.

Go away! he screamed at Lady Death, and she bowed her head, and blew on the roses until they danced around him, bright blooming red flower and withered black husk together, and then went away.

The roses smelled sweet.

Any rose would smell sweet, Harry thought. Roses were interchangeable. Thoughts were interchangeable. He could lie here amid the smell of roses and the lure of thoughts and never, never think about things he didn't have to think about.

There was an abyss of Light opening beneath his feet—the path into the paths, the gate to another world. He could fly into that. He could go to see what Calypso McGonagall, and other Light Lords and Ladies who had lived out their lives and faded, had learned so long ago. Harry knew there were beauties there which could soothe his pain, make him forget. If he listened, he could hear the running of a golden Lethe.

Behind him, the wild Dark touched his neck with a cold nose. Harry turned and looked into the darkness between the stars. He could fly there, too. He could become the wind, and take delight for the rest of eternity in inflicting pain like his own on those who dared to have happy lives. The Dark gave a quiet, eager, wolf-like little whine. It had always wanted him. It could have him, if he would agree. Its longing was touched with awe now, the eagerness that came with the idea that it could absorb as much magic as currently hung around him.

Harry lay on the beach beside the sea, his hand in the water, and hung between the Dark and the Light.

And then he felt the pull as someone else Apparated in.

He lifted his head, and his magic *snarled*. He knew he could make the person who was coming towards him cease to exist with a thought. But he did not. Some cold part of his mind, which he had inherited from Voldemort, bade him wait and see how amusing she could be.

Monika shuddered and put a hand over her eyes. Even in sending form, with part of her still at home in a magically heated clearing, she could feel the cold of the magic ahead of her beating on her face. Ripples of power made her bones sing, and her blood rose and flowed in different directions like the tide called by the moon. It was an annoying sensation, and she had to pause a moment to deal with it before she could walk forward.

Harry lay ahead of her, with one hand in the water, exactly as she had last seen him.

Save that he was looking towards her.

Monika lifted her head. Well, she had known he might look at her before the end. But she did not care if he did. He wanted to die, and she could offer him the death he wanted. She could even offer him a home for the magic he contained, which, being Harry, he would be rather concerned about. He had no reason to fight her when she sent the tapeworm into him.

“Lord Black,” she began. “I am here to—“

And then he reached out, with a faint, feral expression in his eyes that could not be called a smile, could not be called anything but insanity, and *yanked*.

The rest of her flew away from the clearing near her house and into her sending form. Monika collapsed to her knees, gasping. Suddenly she was really there, on the beach, and magic streaked her vision like melting snow, and filled the world all around her so that she could not sense the coming spring any more.

A grip encircled her throat. It felt like an invisible iron band. It said, more clearly than death did, that he would break her neck if she moved.

“You have been a bane to me since the first day I met you,” Harry’s voice said. He had not moved, but he was there, in front of her, and Monika wondered if he had commanded the beach to tip and spill him down to her. In the bowed position the magic was increasingly forcing her into, she could see only the tops of his shoes. “And I say that you will be a bane no more.” He laughed. “I should have threatened your home and your people before now. What say you, Monika, to the sea rising and covering all of Austria?”

And now Monika really understood what magic and madness of this sort meant.

Sand filled her mouth. She had to spit several times before she could say, “You would drown many innocents to reach my land.”

“I do not care.” Strange light shone from Harry’s face onto hers. Monika was terribly afraid it came from actual sparks burning in his eyes. “The sea is always hungry—immeasurably hungry. She birthed the land, and someday soon she will have all of us again. So Kanerva believed, and I am inclined to believe the same thing. The difference between us is that I can make something like this come true, if I choose to believe it.” He bent down, and she could see the edge of his cheek and jawline now. Monika knew she did not want to see his eyes. “What say you, Monika? Shall the waters rise? Or will you agree to stay away from Britain for the rest of your days? I shall require a vow from you that will kill you if you break it.”

“The Unbreakable Vow?” Monika whispered.

“Hardly,” Harry said. “We have no one here to serve as Bonder, unless Lady Death would agree.” He laughed, and one of Monika’s eyes burst. She held still, because she could do nothing else, and she loved her life more than her sight. “This is a new spell I will create. You *cannot* break it, in any way. You cannot come to Britain with another Pact member. You cannot send a servant here. You cannot create a glamour of yourself as you did today.”

Monika said nothing.

“And I can do it,” said Harry, with terrible gentleness, “as surely as I just insured that you will never see out of your right eye again, because I am the most powerful wizard in the world. Didn’t you *know*?”

He lifted his arms, and Monika felt the form of the world change. The structures of magic, which had not included any such vow as Harry talked about, trembled and warped and split apart, and made place for the new spell. And then Harry cast it, in a voice so twisted with sea-wind and the cry of the waves leaping behind him, hungry and angry, that Monika could not make out the incantation.

Perhaps that is just as well.

The vow settled around her like a cage that molded itself to every curve of her body, and then the grip on her throat ended. Monika lay, breathing, in the sand. Had she been of the Light, false courage would have required her to say that she was exhausted and could not stand. But it was not that, not at all. She was afraid to look up at him, and she knew, now, that she should never have come here.

“Now, *go*,” Harry said, and flung her home.

She landed in her clearing, face down in the dirt, as she had left Britain. A confused bleat came from some of her sheep.

Monika took a deep breath and stood, shaking out her hair, her mind thronging with spells that could help compensate for her new blind side.

She was of the Dark. She had gambled, and lost. She would live with the consequences.

Harry bowed his head, and took several deep breaths when the apparition of the woman flickered out as if she had never been, in Apparition.

He could feel the magic pressing down, trying to crush his mind. It was eager to be of service to him, but that very service would be his doom. He was not meant to carry such a burden. Voldemort could have contented himself with this level of magic, Monika could have, maybe even Jing-Xi or Kanerva, but not Con—

Do not think the name

--and not him. Harry knew his choices were two: to die, which would make the magic dissipate and appear again only among the memories of wizards dancing on Walpurgis Night, or to give it away and climb out of the madness it induced.

And now he stood, abyss above him, darkness behind him, sea in front of him, and had to make that choice.

Harry closed his eyes. He *wanted* to die. He wanted it so badly. He could remember speaking to Joseph about that desire, last year, and the tingle of yearning in his stomach had increased since his brother—

Do not think the name

--had died. What better way to die than to follow him? Harry had been content enough to do that when he went down to be the sacrifice. It all made sense. He had done something great for Draco, delaying going to his twin's side because Draco had asked him to. He would do something great for his brother, too, giving up his life so that he could live. It balanced.

But what about the rest of the world?

Does anyone else in the world want me, mad as I am, broken as I am? Harry walked in his mind through a garden of tumbled white statues and snap-stemmed silver flowers, and he did not know.

There were people he could help, but that was not the same thing as someone wanting him. There were people who would be glad to see him alive, but that was not the same thing as someone wanting him. There were people who would mourn if he died, but that was not the same thing as someone wanting him.

In that hour of water, as Harry stood with the sea lapping around his feet, what came to him was a memory of sweat and skin and sex, a body beneath his, and a hand gripping his hair and tugging.

Yes. Draco wants me.

So he had that reassurance.

But even that was not enough. Harry stepped over a glinting pool, nearly drained, with a statue lying face down in it, and knew that, if he returned to the world, he would have to return for himself. *He* would need to want to live. He could not bury himself again in service to other people, not with the Occlumency pools boiled away and not with Con—

Do not think the name

--gone. He had to make this choice for himself.

He stood in the broken garden. Under him was the abyss of Light. Harry stared yearningly into it. The wolf leaned against his back, a cold weight, and the sea spoke to him again and again, ready to rise if he commanded it and drown Austria.

This time, the memory that came to him was one of the vial full of Switching Potion clashing against his ribs. He had been selfish, then. He had known that giving up his life would hurt Draco and Snape and others, but he had not cared.

True to my House.

There was—

Do not think the name

--enough in his memory that he did not *need* to climb out. But he also did not *want* to give himself to Light or Dark, or to step into the water. The madness would be simple, but it would also be boring. It would be the end of his existence as a conscious being. He would become, more or less, the plaything of any force that wanted him, until, perhaps, the Pact hunted and killed him, or he took over the world with his magic, or everyone drowned.

No. I don't want that.

The thought of what lay ahead, all the healing and repairing to be done, foisted itself on him as a great weakness. So Harry narrowed his gaze, and refused to think about the healing and the repairing. He thought only of rest and sleep, not in madness or in death, but in Draco's arms. Everyone else who wanted his help would just have to wait their turns, that was all.

Most of his life, Harry had been at the beck and call of one form of service, one person, one cause or another. The thought of simply laying down his burden for a while and dreaming in silence attracted him even more than death did.

He looked up. A golden rope of his desire dangled above him. Harry reached out and gave it a firm tug. It held. Dark green strands braided it, he saw. Dark and Light, both always and forever intertwined.

Harry grasped the rope and began to climb out of the abyss.

Jing-Xi turned. The window that showed Harry hovered in front of her, and behind her were the windows containing other members of the Pact—save for Monika, who was recovering on her own time. No one had opposed Jing-Xi when she refused to contact the Dark Lady of Austria. Besides, opening a window just as Monika approached Harry would have been too awkward to endure.

"Need we argue about this again?" Jing-Xi asked coolly. Of course, it felt as though all she had been doing for the past few months, whenever she was in communication with her peers at all, was argue about Harry, so she thought she had the right to sound exasperated. There were problems with the emergence of a new Lord-level child in the Pacific, and a wizarding disease on the verge of breaking out in Mexico, which looked like it could be a variant of the Serpent's Tongue Plague. They should be ready to think about other things by now, Jing-Xi believed. "He didn't hurt Monika, even though he was insane at the time. He fought back against Lord Riddle *alone*, and he didn't immediately take over the world or come hunting us. And he's coming back from madness on his own. Need we really appoint someone to watch over him?" That was the Pact's latest suggestion, put forth by Lord Brewer. Jing-Xi thought it sounded like the monitoring board that Aurora Whitestag had led, and had opposed it from the start.

"There is still the matter of the insult he offered us," Elena said in her dead voice.

"And if you come to blows with him over insults, it is a private matter, and no need to involve the Pact," Jing-Xi snapped. Yes, the Dark Lady of Peru was a formidable enemy, but Jing-Xi was not afraid of her, especially not when she could see similarly disgusted looks growing on the faces around her. The demonstration of Harry's stability in the midst of madness, with Monika going away half-blind but not dead and not even drained of her power, had impressed most of them, she knew. "He has never been allowed to fit in as he should have. We distrusted him for not being Declared, and then we said he must fight a war on his own, and then we tried to distract him while Lord Riddle still threatened his land and his people. He has grown up *much* better than can be expected, and with much less help. We should accord him as much courtesy as any other Lord now. Preventing you from attacking his partner, my Lady Elena, and turning his back while he spoke to us, could hardly be said to be an insult by any of the standards we use."

"I agree," said Alexandre. His face was as nearly content as Jing-Xi had ever seen it. She thought he was satisfied to have seen so many prophecies come true at once. "Leave the boy alone. We may watch him until the end of his return to sanity if we wish, but he has done more than we could expect of anyone."

"I agree," Pamela said at once.

"And I," said Brewer.

"And I," Coatlicue added. Her voice had a ring of pride, as if she had been the one to mentor Harry to his current level. Jing-Xi could forgive that, really. She had held out for being as neutral in Harry's situation as possible, and so had ended up being the one who treated him most like part of the Pact already. "Besides, I would like to turn our attention to the Serpent's Tongue crisis."

One by one, other voices murmured their assurances. Elena was the only holdout, and from the way Alexandre eyed her, Jing-Xi rather thought she would have a problem if she tried to go after Harry, even undetected.

And Monika—

Jing-Xi concealed a smile. She had never seen the Dark Lady of Austria so thoroughly spanked.

“Yes, let us look to Mexico,” said Pamela. “When this is ended.”

Jing-Xi nodded, and turned to face the window again.

Harry climbed, and, as he climbed, he gave his power away.

Oh, not *all* of it. But he could not live with so much magic squatting in the back of his mind, or racing about his head like a crown of song, asking to do things for him. And there was always the possibility that Voldemort’s power would gain a will of its own if he confined it for long enough and try to break free of the prison or make him do things he would rather not do. Harry would not risk that.

He was Slytherin in his selfishness, perhaps, but not his ambition. Or perhaps he was more ambitious than others, to want to accomplish something without the magic that would intimidate many of his potential opponents before they even lifted their voices.

So he cut Voldemort’s power from his. Had he not lived so long with the magic released from the phoenix web at the end of his second year, it would have been impossible, but he had, and he knew what his magic should feel like. Everything else, he cut away, and sent elsewhere.

One third went to the wild Dark, which immediately stopped floating beside him in the form of a black wolf and went away to play with it. Harry almost smiled at that, the first smile he had given since—

Do not think the name

--his brother had died. The wild Dark was a child in so many ways that he couldn’t regret his decision not to join it, powerful and beautiful though it could also be. It was not in him to Declare for Dark. It had probably been too late for that the moment he fully understood his vows.

One third went to the Light. The golden abyss beneath him had opened and contracted like a beating heart, but when he dropped his magic into it, the contractions increased, until only a small slit of gold remained, rather like the gold that had split the surviving Death Eaters’ Dark Marks as they burned away. It would open for him if he wished to drop, but not otherwise.

How did I know that, about their Dark Marks?

When he stopped to think about the question, he hung motionless from the rope, and the magic made a determined effort to come back. Harry shook his head and started climbing again. One thing at a time.

And one more third of extra magic to give away.

He gave it to the sea, that ever-hungry creature that would have obeyed his command to drown Austria, and which had called him to her when Voldemort died. He had dreamed of that. Or had he simply had dreams of the sea, and his mind and magic used the coincidence to pull him here, to a place where he had felt something like peace and safety, and a connection to the Potter line?

He would never know.

His magic vanished into the sea like a diving dolphin. Harry knew the waves would use it better than he would. Perhaps it would go to nourish hippocampi, to split the web on a kraken, or to encourage the flourishing of sirens. He could not know, and he was glad not to.

And then he had the most difficult part of the abyss to climb, through diamond shards that waited to cut into him. Harry hesitated only a moment before he struck forward, watching with clinical detachment as the shards cut into his arms and made them bleed.

None sliced across his wrists, though. None would unless he changed his mind and decided he wanted to die.

He did not. He had made the decision to reach the top of the abyss for himself, and he would go on living. For himself.

It had to be so, no matter how much he loved and admired and respected other people. Otherwise, the deep desire to die would reassert itself someday, and he did not know if he could always keep himself from following it.

And when he was back to sanity, he was back to grief.

Do not think the name

So he climbed, and the diamond shards closed in harder and harder, until the golden rope ran like a narrow stream of warm water through pack ice. And still Harry climbed, his mind cleared, concentrated on that single goal.

To live. For himself.

Memories poured in, and Harry fitted and spun them into place. Emotions crashed into his head, and he winced but continued the climb. Sanity slipped nearer and nearer, and sometimes he stopped to take a breath, but on he always went.

He had to. He wanted to. He needed to.

For himself.

It must be so. Harry understood that now, as though the death of the one person he had tried most to live for—

Do not think the name

--had shown him the folly of doing it for anyone or *anything* else. He could not be just his causes. He could not be just his sacrifices. He had *tried*, when he went to Voldemort's lair, and that had resoundingly failed, just as every project begun in Godric's Hollow ultimately had.

The old way did not work. So he would try this new way.

He reached a glassy roof. Harry lifted one hand from the rope and ran his palm over it. Pain waited on the other side, pain and the full consciousness of pain.

He took a deep breath, and butted his head and shoulders against the glass, shattering it.

His eyes opened, and saw what was there, the gray sea in front of him and the weak sun rising, and the people walking cautiously towards him across the damp sand of the beach. And then he screamed, because the voice that had protected him relentlessly in the depths of his madness was equally relentless now.

Say the name.

"Connor," Harry whispered, and there were tears on his face as if he had never wept for his brother. He was in the world he had fled because it contained his twin no longer. Now he would never flee it again.

It hurts, it hurts, he wailed to himself.

But you are not alone, another part of himself answered, and he looked up the beach again.

Snape and Peter had both been reluctant to approach Harry, insisting that a mad wizard with that much power was dangerous in any case, and that they should wait until Harry had some chance to get used to his status as Voldemort's magical heir and control his power. Draco had not listened. They had Apparated to the beach and come slowly closer and closer to Harry, pausing several times along the way to watch.

And then the sense of his magic had diminished. Draco had looked back in time to catch the look of shock on Peter's face, the near-sorrow on Snape's.

Did they really think he'd keep it? Draco snorted and turned away again. *He wasn't thinking of what he could do with it. He was thinking of what it might make him do to other people—or he was thinking that he didn't want it. Either way is a very good sign.*

And then Harry stumbled and gave a low-voiced cry that Draco knew, just as he knew where Harry would be, was his brother's name, and the time for caution had passed. Draco ran forward.

Harry turned to meet him, and devastated though his face was with the remnants of grief and mourning, his eyes were sane. Words dried in Draco's throat. He put his arms around Harry instead and held him tight, tight, tight.

He could have died. He wanted to die. But he didn't stay mad, and he didn't commit suicide. He came back. He came back.

And Harry whispered—perhaps his magic or his Legilimency had brought Draco's thoughts to him, but Draco didn't really care about the method right now—the words Draco had most desired to hear. “I wanted to come back.” His arms encircled Draco's shoulders in return. “But I don't want to be alone.”

“You won't be, ever again,” Draco said, and his arms clamped down tight, tight, tight.

Harry whispered his brother's name and began to weep, then, and Snape and Peter came forward. Snape tried to take Harry out of Draco's arms. Draco refused to let him go. He knew what Silver-Mirror looked like, and could Apparate Harry there as well as Snape could.

His hand wandered into Harry's hair and clenched there, though he could not bring himself to tug.

Mine.

No, ours, more precisely.

And then he pulled back enough to look Harry in the eye, and remembered Harry's words, and corrected his own wording.

No. Ours, yes, but his own, too. At last.

Come back from the breaking.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-One: Back From the Abyss

Harry waited until they were back in their bedroom before he yawned. It was such a massive, jaw-cracking yawn that Draco would not have been surprised to see it travel around the sides of his head and split the top half from the bottom.

“I'm tired,” Harry said, opening one eye.

Draco nodded gravely, and then dragged him towards the bed. “Do you want Dreamless Sleep?” he asked. He could only imagine what Harry's nightmares would look like if he didn't take some kind of potion.

“No,” Harry said, and twisted somehow, so that when he fell onto the sheets, he looped his arms and legs over Draco and Draco fell with him. “I want just to *rest*. And I want you to stay with me.”

Harry probably wouldn't understand why the tone of his request—sweet, gentle exhaustion, without a hint of apology—made Draco's throat tighten and his eyes spark with tears. At least, he wouldn't understand right *now*. But Draco was more than amenable. His own muscles still shook with aches, dirt felt ground-in to his pores, and his hair dangled in his eyes from sweat, but next to the relief of having Harry back, he could ignore them for a while. He rolled over so that he lay next to Harry, head resting on his chest, arms around him. Harry gave a little sigh at him, and then closed his eyes.

If Draco was any judge of his breathing—and he should be—Harry was asleep on the *instant*.

Draco did stay awake himself long enough to consider what people would probably demand over the next few days. Explanations of how Voldemort had died, proof that it had happened, proof of Connor's death, information on the Horcruxes and why Harry had taken so long to locate the last ones and destroy them—

I don't care. They can demand whatever they like. It doesn't mean that either one of us has to answer until we're ready.

And with *that* in mind, Draco closed his eyes and gave himself to sleep.

It was hours before Snape could take a seat in an armchair, lean back, and close his eyes.

To him had fallen the task of telling the others in Silver-Mirror that, at last, Voldemort was truly dead; Peter had been too overwhelmed by the loss of Harry's brother. Stares had followed, then innumerable questions, and then a celebration that the others had tried their very best to drag him into. Snape had resisted. He wanted to find a room where he could be alone and *think* about all that had happened.

Strangely, with as much as he had to think about, his memories tended to dance like hurricane winds around one central point: the moment when his Dark Mark had torn and burned with light, and he had understood that the monster he once sold his soul to was, finally and completely, dead.

Snape's hand moved lightly, tracing his unmarked left arm, and the skin there, which looked unaffected other than a small bare patch where the fire had also burned hair. No matter how many times he touched it, he could not believe it. The black snake and skull had been part of him for so long he had adapted his movements to them, learned how to act so that the sleeve always covered them, learned to ignore the bitter, biting pain that arose in them when Voldemort felt angry, learned how to turn away from the stares that resulted when people learned he was Marked. And now—gone. Now he could shed those instincts if he liked, and the people still staring would be the ones society judged rude for it.

He did not know what to think, how to feel. It was as though he had died and opened his eyes expecting an afterlife of torment, only to find that he had been allowed into a world of tests and trials identical to the one he left behind.

Tests and trials. Do not forget that.

It would have been easier if Regulus had been with him now.

Snape frowned and opened his eyes. He did not like the feelings that assaulted him: loneliness chewing a hole in the center of his chest, and regret keener than he had felt since Regulus died. Yes, he knew now that he should have acknowledged Regulus's love while he still lived. But he had known that for more than two months. Why should the feeling reoccur so strongly now?

Because now I have a life worthy of sharing with him.

Snape leaned his head back again, and was still for a long time. When he rose, it was to brew.

The depth of his grief made Peter feel as if he were made of rotten ice. Now a weight had shattered the surface of him, and he stared into the cold water beneath, and *mourned*.

Not James's son, after all, nor Lily's. He was more than those, his own person. And Harry's brother.

Of course, Peter did not yet know the whole story, only what Draco and Snape had managed to surmise from the Switching Potion Harry had taken into Voldemort's lair and the state of Connor's body, which Peter and Snape had gone to fetch while Draco took Harry away. But it seemed likely. Harry had gone down, seeming to obey his old training after all, and intending to die as a sacrifice for Connor—save that Peter was sure this *had* been his own choice, however much it might not seem like it to someone else. But Connor had died as a sacrifice for him instead, and not just because he wanted to spare Harry's life, or Peter doubted the prophecy would have been fulfilled.

And now Peter stood in the room where they had placed Connor's body, under preservation spells to keep it from decaying until Harry was well enough for the funeral, and stared at it, and could think of nothing equal to this.

I intended to die in the garden. But I didn't intend to die for something so much as think that I should use my death for good, because my life was less precious than someone else's.

Peter closed his eyes. *And that would have been an empty sacrifice next to knowing that I was loved, seeing with clear eyes how much people would miss me, and laying down my life anyway. This was a gesture of love. Mine would have been a gesture of—emptiness.*

In silence, as if he and Connor were the center of a wheeling galaxy, Peter stood there, and watched. Connor's face bore perhaps a dozen trails of blood, springing from eyes and ears and nose. His eyes were shut, and, to hear Draco talk, had been since he found him. He had a faint smile on his lips, a smile of farewell that Peter hoped Harry had seen before he departed and killed Voldemort.

And somewhere, in the early hours of the morning, the transition came.

Peter put one hand over his face, and took a deep breath of the kind he last remembered heaving when he broke through his phoenix web and realized the extent of the Marauders' betrayal.

Even if no one else cares for me as much as they do for others, even if I think I could die and no one would miss me, there is still good that I can do if I live which I can't if I die.

That was the vow he had given himself when he chose to escape from Azkaban and help Harry, another victim of the phoenix web and Dumbledore's sacrificial training, instead of simply squatting where he was and meditating bitterly on how wronged he'd been.

He could make that vow again now, couldn't he? And it wasn't true that no one needed him. Harry did. Connor had. There were the students he had taught during his tenure as Defense Against Dark Arts professor, and the students of Gryffindor House whose tears he had dried and whose triumphs he had cheered. The idea he'd formed of himself as someone without human connections when he decided to die for the Ravenclaw Horcrux was as limiting, in its own way, as the idea the other Marauders had formed of him when they thought him only fit to act as a traitor so that no one else would find out Dumbledore had exposed the Potter children to danger.

I'm not just that. I'm more than that. And if, by some chance, that idea was true, I can be more than that in the future.

We labored so long to make Harry consider the future instead of just the present. And now I'm going to be so much of a hypocrite as to forget that?

For the first time since Voldemort had stolen Connor away, Peter smiled. And if the hand he reached out to touch Connor's hair trembled, well, no one but Connor and him had to know that.

The world had darkened.

He was dead.

Parvati had told Padma, lightly enough, that the marriage ritual she and Connor used had bound their souls, but didn't require that they be endlessly faithful to each other if one of them died. And that was true enough. She could marry someone else with another kind of ritual, or take lovers.

At the moment, though, she wished they had used a ritual that would drag one partner into death immediately after the other. She wanted, so badly, to just *be gone*. Not really into death, not permanently, but to end the pain, and a ritual that dragged her away would have been one solution.

She sat in a corner of their room and cried, her hair shielding her face, her nose so swollen that it felt as if it would burst any moment. The tears would not stop coming. She hadn't prepared herself for this.

Every moment since Connor's capture had been a nightmare. But, somehow, she hadn't faced up to the ultimate nightmare at the end of it. She had believed that he would return to her, that Harry would rescue him and bring him home. Yes, Voldemort was a monster, but heroes always faced and fought monsters in the stories, and they always won in the end. When Parvati listened to the history songs and the tales her mother used to tell her, that was the part she loved most, the happy ending. She had felt sorry for the people who died in the pursuit of the ending and thought they were very noble, but, well, the story wasn't *about* them, really; it was about the heroes. And since Connor filled the position of hero in this story, she hadn't thought he would die.

He had. She had known it from the expression on Professor Pettigrew's face when he Apparated back in, even before she saw him holding Connor's body. She'd rushed forward, and tried to shove him aside. If he wasn't breathing, they should *make* him breathe. Didn't they *know* that? You used a spell that would remove a block if someone was choking, and you used a spell that would guide air in and out of their lungs if someone wasn't breathing. It was simple magic, something that every Light pureblood

child learned from the time she was six years old or so.

Parvati had pointed her wand at Connor and said, “*Creo aerae!*” It was the spell to make someone breathe. She’d known it for *such* a long time, but she’d never had cause to use it. Now she did, and it was a relief to know that something she had learned in childhood, something so simple, could be the means of bringing her husband back from the dead.

But Connor’s chest refused to move. Parvati frowned.

Professor Pettigrew spoke in a horribly gentle voice that Parvati knew would break her if she listened. “Miss Patil—Parvati—“
 “Patil Potter,” she said, not looking at him, but at Connor. “I took his last name like that, and he took mine. He’s Potter Patil now. It’s part of the ritual we used.” She aimed her wand at Connor again. “*Creo aerae!*”

Nothing. No movement.

Parvati turned fiercely on Professor Pettigrew. “What did you do to him? If the preservation spells are keeping him like that, take them off!” She stamped her foot. “He needs air, you know.”

“He’s dead,” the professor said quietly.

“No, he’s *not*,” Parvati said.

“Yes. He is.” And the professor held a hand out towards her, as if that would comfort her.

Parvati had darted away from it, and then she had looked back at Connor, and then she had *run*. Because, obviously, if he was dead, she could not stay there.

She had wept since then. Vague thoughts about contacting Padma and her parents drifted across her mind, but before she could have their sympathy, she would have to explain what had happened. The effort that would take was wearying just to think about.

So she sat there, and cried until she could cry no longer, and then simply slumped against the wall, drained and dead in her own right.

The door opened. Someone crossed the floor to her, grasped her chin, brushed her hair aside, and held a Calming Draught to her lips. He never spoke. As Parvati swallowed the potion, she realized it must have had a sleeping draught intermixed, because her muscles relaxed at once and her mind slipped away, into the temporary cessation from pain she had wanted.

She told herself, when she woke the next morning, still leaning against the wall, that grief had done strange things to her memory. Professor Snape might have been the one who brewed the potion, but he would never have been the one who brought it to her.

Ginny wondered for a moment why she had to be the person to pull her brother out of depression.

Then she remembered. *It’s because I’m stronger than he is, some of the time.*

“Well, *I* want to go see him,” she said. She could perhaps have been less bossy if she tried, but coaxing rarely worked on Ron. Bossing did the trick, perhaps because he was so used to it from Mum and five—*four*—older brothers. “So, come on, Ron. The funeral can’t be more than a few days away, and this might be the only private hour that we’ll have with him.”

Ron just closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. “I never thought he would die,” he whispered. “Out of any of us. He was Harry’s *brother*. That was supposed to make him safe.”

“Percy was our brother, and the Minister’s assistant, and it didn’t make him safe,” said Ginny quietly. The reference to Percy made Ron open his eyes and glare at her, as she had hoped it would. She put her hands on her hips and stared him down. “Besides, Hermione wants to see Connor, too. So get on your feet, and let’s go to the room they set aside for him.”

That was, perhaps, playing more than a little dirty, because Ron still had the lingering remnants of a crush on Hermione, but it made him grimace and get to his feet, so Ginny didn’t really care how fair she had to play it. “I swear, if that prat Zacharias makes one comment about Connor he shouldn’t—“ Ron started.

“Zacharias won’t be there,” Ginny cut in. It was true. Zacharias had spent some time comforting Hermione, but he had also gone home to his mother now, probably to discuss what the Light purebloods were going to do in the wake of Voldemort’s fall. Ginny grimaced in turn. She supposed it was necessary, and, after all, Zacharias hadn’t been in Gryffindor and hadn’t known Connor like the rest of them. But, since she was not interested in being fair right now, she didn’t think he should have left Hermione alone to grieve, either.

Ron’s eyes brightened, a bit, and he moved down the hall in the direction of Connor’s room—the funeral room, as Ginny had started to call it in the privacy of her mind, though for all she knew, they would move Connor’s body out of the room before the funeral. Ginny kept at his heels, just to make sure he couldn’t turn his back and walk away at the last moment.

There were wards on the door, but they slid apart the moment Ginny held out her hand. She managed a small smile, then. Professor Pettigrew had set the wards to make sure no merely curious bystander could wander in to gawk, but he’d created them so that they would recognize sympathy in someone who really *wanted* to enter.

When they opened the door, the first person Ginny saw was Hermione. She stood with her eyes tightly shut and her hands clenched, as though she didn’t want anyone to see her crying. Then Ginny’s gaze went over Hermione’s head and to the body on a cot in the middle of the room.

Absurdly, her first thought was, *They could have cleaned his face*. It still bore trails of blood.

Then she came closer, telling herself that it was probably because Peter thought such decisions should be left up to Parvati or Harry, and forced herself to look at his silent face.

He was smiling. Were people supposed to be smiling when they died? Of course, the only dead people Ginny had ever seen close at hand had died in battle—including Percy, really, of a thorn through the heart—and so she had no experience with someone who knew his death was coming and had time to arrange his face however he liked.

Ron made a choking sound beside her. Ginny reached out and clasped his hand, without looking away from Connor.

She’d had a varying relationship with him, really. The first two years she was in school, she hadn’t liked him much. And then he was suddenly a Triwizard champion, and he’d won the Cup. After that, he was all right, her slightly older brother’s best friend, prone to taking part in the pranks Ron played on her. But he didn’t always agree with Ron when he and Ginny had arguments, and he’d come up to Ginny on occasion and told her that he appreciated her supporting Harry when the school turned against him and when half the world appeared to want him dead for denouncing Dumbledore.

So he’d been—a friend. Ginny didn’t consider him a friend in the same way Hermione had been, or Neville, but he had always been there. And, as Ron said, she had never given a thought to his dying. He could be captured, but Voldemort would keep him alive to torment Harry, and he would come back in the end.

And now he was gone.

“It’s just not *fair*,” Hermione whispered.

For all her own unfairness, Ginny found herself nodding. Connor should have lived longer. He shouldn’t have suffered before he died. He should have had more of a chance to be Parvati’s husband than he did. All sorts of things should have happened differently.

But would I want that, if it meant that Harry died instead?

Ginny shifted uncomfortably. Her mind tended to work like that in the last few months, taking situations she should feel simply about and twisting them around to look at from different angles. She could even understand her parents’ desire to protect her better than she had at first, even though she intended to ignore their desperate advice and go on to be an Auror in the new Ministry. But she didn’t think it was right to talk about this right now, when Ron was mourning his best friend and Hermione was mourning someone who had been *a* friend, if not as close to her in the last few years as he had been during their first few.

Hermione at last bent over and gave Connor a kiss on a part of his cheek that was free of blood, and then turned and left the room. Ron reached out, slowly, and grasped Connor’s shoulder. He squeezed so hard, Ginny saw his knuckles turn white. The silence was so thick it choked all the words in her throat.

“I’m going to miss you, mate,” Ron said at last, and if that wasn’t as full a mourning as Ginny thought would be good for him, it was much better than the brooding he’d done in the hall.

She reached out, for her part, and flicked the fringe on his forehead away, exposing the heart-shaped scar. That was the scar that had once announced him as the Boy-Who-Lived, and which she had stared at even after she knew that wasn't true, in wonder that a curse could have carved something so perfectly shaped.

"Goodbye," she said softly.

More words would have to come later. Ron was on the verge of a breakdown, so Ginny put an arm around her brother's shoulders and led him away.

Care for the living first, because they need it more than the dead.

Yes, sometimes Ginny really didn't like her own mind.

Rita smiled slowly. There were advantages to persistence—or perhaps for staying away for two days after Voldemort's defeat and then asking, politely, for an interview. She'd been admitted to Silver-Mirror. Now she waited in the same anteroom where Harry had once made her wait, surreptitiously using an Aura-Reader that looked like another quill to check the level of magical power in the house. If Harry had been Voldemort's magical heir, as she'd started to suspect, then his strength should surely have increased.

Draco Malfoy walked through the door in the opposite wall.

Rita quickly dropped the Aura-Reader into her pocket and gave him a majestic nod, sitting back in her chair. "Mr. Malfoy," she said. "I'm glad you've decided to talk to me. The wizarding public of Britain deserves to know what happened to the Dark Lord so many of them were frightened of, don't you agree?"

Malfoy's smile was slow, too, and sparked with winter. He regarded her as if she were an insect—which, while it might be her Animagus form, didn't mean Rita couldn't occasionally be human—and shook his head. "What makes you assume that they deserve to know?" he asked. "Or that they shouldn't be asked to wait another few days, when Harry feels well enough to tell them himself?"

"I assumed he *did* feel well enough to tell them himself," said Rita mildly, while her instincts began to scream at her. *Harry was wounded? How? How bad was it?* "I thought I would be talking to him."

"You should have asked beforehand." Malfoy's cold smile remained, but his eyes were distant, which made him look bored. "You'll be talking to me, and you can accept my words or leave now."

An interview with his partner is better than nothing. And if their words don't match, that's an article in and of itself. "I have no aversion to talking to you, Mr. Malfoy," Rita said, and readied her quill. "First, of course, the question everyone wants to know the answer to. Is You-Know-Who really dead?"

"He is." Malfoy continued to look at her from behind his mask. "So you might as well print his full name, and not that ridiculous moniker. He can't come back and hurt you."

"Malfoy," Rita chided, even as she scribbled. "You know, of course, that it will take some time to sink in."

"Then why did you want an interview today, instead of waiting for a time when people could be more rational?"

Rita shook her head. *He would make a terrible reporter. No sense of what the public needs, at all.* "And was Harry wounded in the battle? Is that the reason no one's seen him since then?"

"Harry is physically whole," said Malfoy, and now his smile was very obviously just a carved line in snow. "But he lost his brother in the battle. He deserves the time to recover from that, don't you think? As much time as he wants."

"I was unaware Connor Potter was dead," Rita said, though she had heard some confused rumors to that effect. Of course, all the reporters who'd tried to gain entrance to the Black house in the past two days had been summarily removed by Severus Snape or Peter Pettigrew, so the rumors had amounted to no one seeing Potter so far. "What happened to him?"

"He died nobly, fighting to keep the world from Voldemort." Malfoy's eyes were focused on her now, but every word was touched with mockery.

“Some more detail than *that* would be appreciated,” Rita commented. She didn’t know how to construct an article out of the scattered bits of nothing Malfoy was giving her. Oh, she could if she *must*, but in a situation like this, when the meat of the matter had to be rich and thick and full? She didn’t want scraps.

“You won’t get it until and unless Harry feels like telling you.” Malfoy gave a slow lizard’s blink. “He probably will. He’d want his brother to be honored for his sacrifice. But, for now, those are the two pieces of information that most matter: his brother is dead, and so is Voldemort. Those should explain well enough why Harry doesn’t feel like celebrating, I would think.” He turned his back on her, as if the interview were done, and started to walk towards the door he came in by.

Rita rapped her quill against her notebook. If Harry had been there, she would have been gentler, but then, Harry would have told her more. She decided it could do no harm to remind Malfoy that the public was not interested in Harry as a *person*, or his brother, either, but as fighters. They would ultimately be more sympathetic to Harry if they could swallow the truth whole. “Mr. Malfoy, not everyone will be as kind as I am. In the absence of information, some of the papers are printing lies.” She softened her voice when he turned around and stared at her. “Doesn’t it make more sense to give me your perspective on the story *now*, so that the *Daily Prophet* can spread the truth instead of rumors? I’m assuming you must know everything Harry does, since you’re so close to him.” *A little judicious flattery never hurt.*

Malfoy snorted at her, and then drew his wand. Rita fumbled for her own, but Malfoy had already murmured two words. She thought one of them was *Exsculpo*, but didn’t hear the other. A purple-red beam of light struck her and then faded into the faint touch of a chill wind along her skin.

“What did you do to me?” Her voice was unfortunately shrill.

“A variation on a spell Harry invented.” Malfoy shrugged at her. “He created it to turn people inside out. *I* simply altered it so that it’ll turn you inside out if you write anything more than the bare facts into your article.”

Rita shivered, and resisted the urge to hug herself. She would have thought he was lying, or joking, but the cold smile was back, and he watched her with eyes that were empty.

“I can’t always control what the *Prophet* edits my articles into,” she said weakly.

“Then I would tell them you didn’t learn enough to write a worthwhile article.” Malfoy put his wand carefully back in his robe pocket. “Just to be safe, you understand.”

With an effort, Rita met his eyes. “Harry wouldn’t like your using that spell,” she said.

“Harry and I are two very different people.” Rita had heard Lucius Malfoy speak in the past weeks about his candidacy for the office of Minister. His son’s voice gave even fewer hints of emotion away than his had. “I use—more direct methods than he does. And he’ll doubtless disapprove, but we’ll argue, and that’s all. I will risk an argument over protecting him.” One blond eyebrow arched. “I would risk much more than that, Skeeter, just in case you think about trying to get around this spell somehow.”

Rita slowed her breathing. *Well*. The tale that Harry’s partner had cursed her for daring to speak the truth would make nearly as good an article as the one about what had really happened in the final battle. She turned to leave. She didn’t see that she and Malfoy had anything more to say to each other.

Malfoy coughed, and, when she looked, his smile had widened. “And, Skeeter?”

She frowned at him.

“There’s a spell on the door that won’t let you tell anyone about the magic I used on you, or, in fact, any magic performed in this house.” The smile widened a bit more, and now the gray eyes saw her all too well. “Just in case you need an extra incentive to respect Harry’s privacy. Good day.”

Harry opened his eyes and blinked at the ceiling. There was a moment of pure white bliss, soft and pale as the pillows and blankets containing him, before his memories rushed back and put Connor in his head.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He missed his twin like part of his mind, but he had known he would, and that hadn’t

stopped him from climbing back into sanity.

“Good morning.”

Harry looked again. Draco leaned against the bedroom door, watching him carefully. He straightened up when he met Harry’s gaze, but didn’t relax. He looked almost feral in his desire to protect, Harry thought.

Well, I’ll let him indulge that. For once, Harry was in the mood to be protected.

“What do you want?” Draco asked softly.

“Breakfast in bed,” said Harry. “And then another nap.” He thought of asking how long it had been since the beach, what people in the outer world were saying about him, and whether everyone believed that Voldemort was dead, and then decided all that could wait. If there was ever a time in his life when he would earn complete privacy and the right to leave people to their own devices, it was now. They would get along without him. They’d managed it for centuries before he was born, and they’d manage it for centuries after he died. One person just wasn’t that important in the grand scheme of things. “A nap with you.”

Draco gave him a flashing smile, and then stepped forward. He wore no smile when he kissed Harry, gently, returning the kiss that Harry had given him as they were about to depart Silver-Mirror for Godric’s Hollow.

“Good,” Draco breathed against his lips. “I’ll bring you toast and eggs and pumpkin juice. Sound tasty?”

“Yes,” Harry said, and snuggled back into the blankets as Draco vanished out the door.

He lay there, and remembered how to breathe, and remembered Connor, and hoped the breakfast would be good.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Two: A Silver Splendour, A Flame

Harry grimaced as he smeared the oil across his hands. It was necessary, as a preparation for the Walpurgis ritual he and Draco would share later that night, but *Merlin*, it smelled strong.

It had to be put on in any case, however—at least in every place but the middle of his back, which Draco would cover for him. For now, Harry took a deep breath, sneezed at the scent of frankincense, and began to wipe the clear oil carefully over his face. It would dry and cling in a very light mask by the time he was done, and then he need only be careful not to move too fast, which would crack it.

Harry was sure the Silver Splendor and Flame, the third Walpurgis rite he and Draco would share, and the ninth of the thirteen courting rituals, *had* to be the strangest one.

Harry stood quietly in the entrance to Silver-Mirror, and did his best not to show how intimidated he was to the reporters gathered on the grass in front of his house and staring at him. He had thought it better to invite everyone at once—the reporters for minor newspapers as well as the *Vox Populi* and the *Prophet*—so that of the dozens of questions that could be asked, and the dozens of replies he would need to give, at least he would not be asked the elementary ones more than once.

But he hadn’t anticipated how many people would be interested in his news of the defeat of Voldemort. Draco had told him that the wizarding world had held off on celebrations so far, out of uncertainty that Voldemort was actually dead. That had increased Harry’s determination to give this press conference a week after his brother died. If he hesitated too long, panic might start spreading.

Draco hadn’t been happy about it, but after a short argument that had resulted in a heated snog, he was resigned to the fact that Harry wanted to do this. He leaned against the door of Silver-Mirror anyway, eyes cool as he regarded the reporters.

Harry coughed, and the whole gathering turned its eyes to him. Harry felt a moment’s disorientation. He hadn’t done anything like this since he fell off the mountain. The Ministry gatherings and other public occasions had always relied on the pureblood dances, and there, he could be confident, because the knowledge still existed in his head even after the suspension of his emotions cracked. But this—this, he would have to use his readings of people and the situation for rather than dances.

I don't like this.

Nevertheless, he put on his best Slytherin smile and said, "Thank you for coming. I know you must be very curious about what happened in the final moment when we defeated Voldemort."

He and Draco had argued about the pronoun, too. Draco thought he should say "I." Harry refused, because, to his mind, Connor was just as much a part of Voldemort's death as he was. Draco had stood down when Harry grew upset enough to use his magic to shake and crack the walls.

He won his share of their debates, too—what Harry should wear for this announcement, for example, and exactly how many political gatherings he should attend in the next few months—but he could read Harry well enough to know when something was really important to him. Harry half-thought he'd argued this time because he thought it expected of him, as Harry's partner and as someone who hadn't liked Connor much when he was alive.

He seems to have changed his mind, a bit, now that he's dead.

"Mr. Black?"

With a start, Harry realized he'd been collecting Kneazles in his thoughts, while the reporters waited for him to say something about Voldemort's defeat. He took a deep breath and herded the Kneazles into line, then lifted his chin proudly. *Connor would want me to do this. I can't run away from my responsibilities. He certainly didn't.*

"The Dark Lord was immortal," he said, which attracted several gasps from the listeners. Otherwise, everyone seemed much more interested in what he was saying than their own reactions, which caused Harry to cough again. *You can be nervous*, whispered a voice in his head that sounded like Snape's, *just as long as you never show them you're nervous*. "His immortality depended on several enchanted objects that guarded pieces of his life-force." He'd chosen the wording on that carefully. "Soul" might have said "Horcrux" to someone, and the last thing Harry wanted was to deal with this problem over again. Fighting three Dark Lords was enough for any one lifetime. "Unfortunately, destroying each enchanted object required a willing sacrifice, thanks to an Unassailable Curse Voldemort had cast." He wasn't going to mention wrestling the soul-shards, either. He was tired of people thinking he was Dark simply because of his actions, and the second-to-last thing he needed, next to a second Voldemort, was someone assuming a soul-shard had managed to possess him.

"Several noble people died to fulfill those conditions," he said quietly. "Narcissa Malfoy." Draco shifted beside him—small, but it was enough to tell Harry what he was feeling. Harry reached out and squeezed his arm without looking away from the reporters. "Minerva McGonagall, during the collapse of Hogwarts. Regulus Black. Henrietta Bulstrode." He wondered for a moment how many people would disagree with calling Henrietta noble, and then told himself that was just a distraction to keep from speaking the last name. "Connor Potter."

Several more gasps sounded, and Rita Skeeter called out, "Is it true that Voldemort kidnapped your brother, Mr. Black?"

Harry nodded. "He did. He intended to make me come to him and give up my life out of despair." It was odd to remember that he might have done it, too. But then again, the events of those two days—the spring equinox and the day that followed, during which he'd been nightmaring, witnessing Henrietta's sacrifice, brewing the Switching Potion, and approaching Voldemort's lair—felt like disjointed pieces of another life, save for the bright point of pain that was Connor's death. "But instead, I went armed, and Connor died willingly, and then I defeated Voldemort."

"What proof is there of this?" A tall woman with keen brown eyes leaned forward. "Forgive me, Mr. Black, but we only have a lack of Dark activity to tell us that You-Know-Who is dead—and we've had that for the last several months, too."

That question, Harry had expected, and it made him feel a bit more confident about the way he might handle the rest of the conference. He lifted an eyebrow, and then snapped his fingers together.

The tall woman ducked as a streak of fire manifested in the air above her head, and then turned itself inside out to reveal Voldemort's body dangling there as if on a thread. Now the gasps were mostly noises of disgust; Harry heard more than one person retching. He didn't know why. Voldemort hadn't died bloodily.

Of course, perhaps he had underestimated the impact of a noseless face and empty eyesockets on people not used to facing Voldemort in their dreams and in battles several times a year.

"There he is," Harry said. He hadn't summoned the body. He'd had it ready, hanging invisibly in the air, but his magic had made it look showier. Harry saw less wrong with that than he used to. "Would you like to look at him more closely, madam? That can

be arranged.”

The woman cringed, but didn't back down. Harry found himself liking her. “How do we know that's the real thing?”

Harry shrugged. “Are you going to trust my word that I defeated him? What other proof would convince you? You cannot *prove* a negative, so I cannot *prove* he's not out there still.” He watched unsympathetically as someone else was sick and a few people closed their eyes and swayed on their feet. *Better they understand this now, so they won't plague me for impossible things when I have more important tasks to accomplish.* “But I will say that he isn't. This is the real body.” He nudged Voldemort's corpse, and it spun as if on a string.

“Why hasn't it been burned?” Melinda Honeywhistle complained. Harry would have recognized her nasal tone anywhere.

“If I did that, I would surely be accused of having a fake.” Harry gave her a sharp-edged smile and swept the body towards her. “Would *you* like to be the brave one who examines it, Madam Honeywhistle?”

“No, I—“ She turned her head away, flinching.

Harry shook his head. He had learned that nothing he could do would content everyone; that lesson still burned in his stomach like the cut of a sickle, after Connor. So he would keep the body a few more days and then burn it at sunrise.

He told them that plan, and they clucked like chickens, some approving the plan, a few objecting. Harry invited the objectors to examine the body. They all declined, but said that *someone* should. Harry asked for names of their preferred candidates. Other than one malicious rival who nominated Honeywhistle, no one said anything. Harry nodded and hid the body behind magic again. He didn't miss the way most people subtly relaxed when it was gone.

And that was his attitude for the rest of the press conference: tell them the truth, offer proof where he had it, and ignore questions that he couldn't have answered to their satisfaction *anyway*. Several departed with a gleam in their eyes that said he would have their articles biting at his heels soon. Harry felt almost relieved. If the defeat of Voldemort had transformed him into the darling of the press, he would have felt even less like he was living his own life than he already did.

Harry finally finished smearing the oil everywhere except the middle of his back, and corked the vial, setting it aside. That wasn't the end of the preparations, of course. He waited a few minutes for the newest oil to dry, then turned slowly to examine the robes on the end of the bed.

Draco had had them made. No courting partner could enter the Silver Splendor and Flame wearing anything but those clothes their partner had given them as gifts. Thus Harry would have the silver ring that Draco had given him as a gift of intention during the first ritual—

And these.

The cloth was deep black, which unexpectedly flamed blue in the light when Harry cast a *Lumos* charm. It made for heavy but comfortable robes, and Harry didn't think they would scratch his skin. His real problem was with the symbols in silver and golden thread stitched all over the hem and sleeves and collar. He had taken the trouble to look them up.

That had resulted in *another* argument with Draco. They spent a lot of their time lately doing that, as if to make up for all the years when each fight had been a devastating blow.

Harry could accept the variation on the Black crest that said he was the head of the family now, and the spread-winged raven that each Dark heir was entitled to, and the charging unicorn that Britain's last potential *vates* had borne. He objected more to the sun in the arms of the crescent moon, a symbol Draco had taken from the Pact's seal, and which he was using to mean “Lord-level wizard,” and the forms of all the various magical species he had freed. Harry didn't want it to seem as if he *ruled* over those species, which he certainly did not. And he'd objected most of all to the small golden crest on the front of his collar. The only good thing about it was that his chin would, mostly, cover it if he kept his head bowed.

It was the Potter family crest.

Harry came face-to-face with Parvati for the first time since Connor's death when he walked out of his room. He didn't think

she'd been waiting for him, and he hadn't sought her out. He'd simply been walking in the upper hallway, trying to convince himself that he *needed* to see someone other than Draco, and then she turned the corner.

They both stopped. Harry braced one hand on the wall and met her eyes gravely. Parvati slowly inclined her head to him.

"No one else will tell me what happened," she said.

Harry grimaced. Part of that was meant to shield her, no doubt, but it had also come about because no one else *knew* what happened, not for certain. And she had the right to know how her husband had died.

"Come with me," he said quietly, and led her down the corridor towards a room that he knew about as head of the Black family, and which the wards would let him extend the knowledge of to Parvati, since she'd married his brother. All the way, he chided himself for the trembling weakness in his muscles. He hadn't fallen from a height or hurt himself in the battle with Voldemort. Why should he feel as if he would like to go back to bed and draw the blankets over his head?

It had to be the conversation with Parvati, and nothing else, and that was silly. If she wished to hate him, that was her right. Harry had changed enough not to accept condemnation from everyone as justified, but Parvati—she had a right, a position with him now, that no one else in the world did.

The room's door opened when Harry passed his hand just above the stone that shielded it. Beyond, the walls swelled into a sudden glory of green and blue, silver and red and gold. Parvati halted and stared in astonishment. Harry felt his cheeks warm. The walls showed stars from common constellations, but so close at hand that one could see their true colors. He hadn't brought her here to *impress* her, just to insure their privacy.

"Please," he said, and gestured to the chairs in the middle of the room, small white things that were easy to forget in the domination of starlight. "Sit."

Parvati did, though she stretched her head back to get a glimpse of Orion sparkling overhead. Harry turned his own chair to face hers; ordinarily, they were meant to orient away from one another, to give the two people the room could accommodate a better chance to view the stars.

Parvati didn't examine the walls or ceiling long. Her gaze rested on him, and her hands clasped together in her lap so hard that she uttered a little gasp of pain. "Now," she said. "Please tell me, Harry."

And Harry did, from the details of how Connor had become a Horcrux—or how he guessed that Connor had become a Horcrux—until the moment when Connor gave his life away. Parvati shut her eyes halfway through, and tears dripped down her cheeks with enough regularity that Harry had to fight to keep his own voice steady. By the end, Parvati had given up every pretense of control and was weeping softly.

Harry hesitated, then moved over beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. He wasn't sure she would welcome it, but she turned around and hung on with frightening strength.

"He had a chance to live," she whispered. "He would have died *anyway* if you hadn't brewed that potion, and you could have left him like that, asked him to die for you without trying to remove the soul-shard, and he would have done it. But you tried to save him, and then—and then he gave it up." Her head rested against his chest for a moment. Harry stroked her hair. "I thought I'd hate you for that, Harry," she said. "But I can't. You tried. You didn't kill him. He killed himself."

Harry just nodded. He felt, as he mostly had not since he climbed back into sanity, that he should have died. If Connor could have been with Parvati again, perhaps it would have been worth it.

And then he thought of Draco, and winced. One bad part of being human and in the midst of his emotions was that his ability to hide from himself had considerably diminished.

But even that he could not regret, since it was so essential to his path as vates.

At last, Parvati pulled away from him, and wiped her tears with a semblance of dignity. Relieved, Harry took his chair again, and locked his eyes with hers before she could look away. "You know that anything you need, you may come to me for," he said quietly. "You're my sister-in-law. And, of course, I think that you may fall heir to the Potter estates, since you took Connor's name—"

Parvati closed her eyes and shook her head. "No," she said quietly. "The ritual we used—it doesn't bind us like that, because most

of the time, the married couple have siblings who are still alive. It was rebellious younger brothers and sisters who used it most often, not heirs.” She gave a small smile. “And I think the vaults and the lands and Lux Aeterna should be kept intact, Harry. Give them to someone whom you think is worthy to become the adopted legal heir of the Potter line. Or maybe someone can be your magical heir, or you’ll find a Potter relative still alive.”

Harry felt a hope he’d not even admitted he’d borne die. “You’re not pregnant, then.”

“No,” Parvati said, opening her eyes. “I used the spells on myself when I first woke from my grief. I didn’t conceive. The estates have gone dormant, Harry, the way they always do in a situation like this, and connected themselves to you.”

“Dormant?” Harry hadn’t encountered the term.

Parvati smiled, but there was a tinge of pity to the expression. “James Potter did no favor in rearing you ignorant of your Light pureblood heritage,” she murmured. “Yes, Harry, that happens when an heir dies and hasn’t designated a replacement—or he has, but the replacement is someone who’s separated himself from the line, as you did by rejecting the Potter name. The estate, the vaults, and any magic attached search for the nearest possible relative, or the ‘heir of the heart’ of the family head, and attach themselves to him—or her, of course. You can’t use the Potter lands, properly speaking, but you’ll hold them in trust for the next heir, and they won’t respond to anyone else in the meantime. And you’ll be in charge of finding and training that heir.”

Harry nodded quietly. He had anticipated that for the Black line, and this was just another thing to add.

“I would have liked to see—a niece or nephew,” he said.

“So would I,” said Parvati. “Invite me to the adoption ceremonies when you find someone who suits, Harry. Though my right to be there is mostly formal, I would like to meet that child, and get to know him or her.”

Harry reached out and took her wrist firmly. “So far as I am concerned, you’re my sister,” he said. “You will be welcome whenever you choose to come.”

Parvati leaned forward, brushed her lips against his cheek, and then left him there.

Harry fastened the robes carefully, scowled one more time at the Potter crest, and shook his head. Draco had told him the symbol didn’t change even if one merely held dormant estates and vaults in trust for the next heir. A lot of shouting had left his partner unmoved. Harry huffed under his breath, and began the next step in his preparations.

Draco had told him he had to “do something” with his hair. Harry had imagined a glamour that would make it appear less messy.

That wasn’t what the ritual required.

Harry resignedly eyed the silver circlet—torque, Draco had insisted on calling it, though Harry didn’t think that was correct—that would hold his hair back. He would have to use spells to make it lie flat, and probably to hold the torque in place.

Why did I agree to a three-year joining dance, again? Or, at least, why didn’t I read up on the rituals first?

He knew the answer, of course. At the time, reading about it would be to admit to its happening, and Harry hadn’t wanted to admit that. He had still been, in his heart, more than half the humble servant, and less than half the person who wanted to join with Draco.

But I’m not the only one who’s changed, he thought, as he picked up the torque and stared into the mirror. *And if my father can make such an effort, so can I.*

Harry and Draco had said they would attend Lucius’s latest speech in pursuit of the office of the Ministry together—it was attend all of the candidates’ speeches or attend none, in Draco’s opinion—but Draco had excused himself with a murmured apology. Harry didn’t mind. Draco needed to circulate on his own, to exchange winks and nods and words with those who were fast becoming his contacts in the world of Ministry politics, and to establish himself as firmly outside Harry’s shadow. And Lucius’s, come to that, though Harry thought that rather more likely to be already in place.

He ended up watching Lucius's speech while leaning against a wall. Lucius had chosen Diagon Alley as the site, and established a small platform in front of Gringotts. Harry had to admire the symbolism. Lucius wanted it to seem as if he had nothing against nonhumans. He wouldn't be so crass as to claim that the goblins supported him, of course, but he would try to use a silent language to bolster his actual words, and have the best of both the magical creatures and the humans who didn't want them in the Ministry.

The seventh of May had been chosen for the election, and it was the fourth of April now. Harry was rather looking forward to the election. He'd had a quiet word with Syrinx, and the Gloryflower artisans were at work enlarging the ranks of the golden voting owls. Harry wanted to see Lucius's expression when he found out why.

"Harry."

He glanced up in surprise. His father stood next to his shoulder and stared down at him. Harry straightened with a small nod. It was true he hadn't spent much time in Snape's company since Connor died, but then, Snape himself seemed occupied, brooding over Regulus and more concerned with Harry's state of sanity and health than discussing what had happened to Connor. And Harry wanted to think of his brother's death when he didn't have something else he *must* spend time on, because he still needed to turn and settle it in his mind, and find a place for all his grief.

"Walk with me," Snape said.

Harry nodded again, and followed him deeper into the crowd. Few people noticed him going, since he had tamped down on his magic and wrapped a Notice-Me-Not Charm around himself. Perhaps someone did and would anticipate it as a political commentary on Lucius's speech, but Harry had finally begun to realize he couldn't control everyone's perceptions of his minor actions.

Snape guided him almost to the end of Diagon Alley, and the entrance that led to Muggle London. He halted outside the Leaky Cauldron's back wall. Harry looked up at him and waited.

"I have not been sure what to say about the death of your brother," Snape began quietly.

Harry nodded. Other families might have rushed together at once, extending sympathy and condolences. And his relationship with Draco was like that, because they understood each other well enough that Draco knew what kind of sympathies to extend. But he and Snape had always trod on a more formal footing. Snape would have wanted to wait until he *was* sure what to say.

"You know I didn't like him."

"Yes, I know," Harry said calmly. He was no longer in that state of mind where hearing anyone disparage Connor cut him to the bone. He hadn't been since the first three days he spent solely in Draco's company, when Draco had talked almost solely of Connor's virtues. "But you agreed to train him in dueling nonetheless, and you put up with him when you could have hurt him badly, and for that, I'll be grateful forever, sir."

Snape gave a small shake of his head. "I was not trying to create excuses for my behavior, Harry. I wanted to explain why I took so long to consider his sacrifice in the proper light."

Harry cocked his head. "Isn't even that sort of an excuse for your behavior, sir?"

Snape glared at him. Harry smiled back. No, his relationship with his father would never be perfect. He didn't care. He had once thought he had the perfect parents, perfect in their attendance to the duties needed to save the world. If he never thought that again, he would be happy.

"I have been angry with you, as well," Snape continued, "for going into Voldemort's lair intending only to die, and for imprisoning us when you know we would have stood beside you."

Harry shifted from foot to foot. This was something Draco hadn't approached him about; he seemed to feel the death of his brother had punished Harry enough for his mad plan. But, of course, it would come up with Snape.

"You would have prevented me from doing what I intended to do," said Harry quietly. "It was especially pertinent that I get rid of you, since you would have recognized the Switching Potion."

"Yes, I would have tried to prevent your death," said Snape. "And I will not think myself in the wrong for that."

“I don’t think you should.” Harry ran his hand through his hair, and wished, for a moment, for the confidence that had led him to confront Snape after Regulus’s death and pull him out of his grief. Of course, *then*, he had been sure he was in the right and Snape in the wrong. It wasn’t easy when the shoe sat so heavily on the other foot. “But I didn’t care, at that moment, about what you might think, or Draco, or Peter—or Connor. I didn’t mean to give him a choice, you know. I drank the Switching Potion before I told him what would happen to the Horcrux. He was the one who made the choice to take it back and then swallow the h-healing potion.”

Fuck, his eyes were tearing up. Harry took a deep breath and held them shut for a moment. He would not suppress his emotions with Occlumency again, but that didn’t mean he wanted to tear up whenever he thought of his brother.

“What made you care so little?” Snape demanded. “I have never known you that deficient in consideration for others, Harry.”

“I know,” Harry whispered, and sought for words to explain it. But, at the last, only the truth would do. “I was insane at the time, sir. And I thought I had done everything I could for you, and I owed Connor my life and the chance for he, himself, to live. Dying was the only way I could think of to accomplish that.”

Snape’s hands closed on his shoulders with surprising force, and pulled him into his arms. Harry stumbled, but went. Snape held him there, in an embrace too tight to be comfortable, and hissed into his ear.

“None of us will ever be done with you, Harry. Do you understand me?”

Harry shut his eyes and nodded. A current of clear mourning ran through his head, mingled with a strange kind of pity. When his emotions first awakened and his magic shook off the phoenix web, he had been angry at Connor for having so much of their parents’ attention and affection. Now, though, he had to wonder if his brother had ever been loved like this.

He was. By me. The way he died suggests he knew that. I hope he did.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice muffled against Snape’s robe. His arms rose and snaked around Snape’s middle.

“For scolding you?” Snape sounded frustrated with himself. “I meant to explain myself, Harry, not excoriate you.”

“For loving me,” Harry said. “For being my father.”

There was a pause, and then Snape’s hands relaxed on his shoulders a bit. “Well.” His voice was the soft one Harry had often heard him use around his potions when the slightest bit of noise would disturb their brewing. “I can live with that, I think.”

The torque was as in-place as it was going to get. Harry shoved at it with the heel of his hand, and then growled under his breath. *When they designed these rituals, didn’t they ever think about people with messy hair? The ancient wizards must have all looked like Draco, for as much consideration as they gave me.*

Torque—given from Draco’s hand—done, it was time for him to call the tame slice of the Dark that powered this ritual. Harry shook his head even as he held out his hands. He didn’t quite believe that a joining dance was powerful or interesting enough to attract the attention of the Dark, but it seemed so. On the night when it raged wildest, a slice of it would come to the courting couple, if called, and make the magic that bound them what it was.

Rather like a shard of Voldemort’s soul—

Harry cut the thought off with a jab of his mind, and then whistled. He felt the calm, cool attention of a, well, of a something that grew more and more excited as it examined his mind. And then it burst into existence above his palms, a shimmering trail of dusty darkness edged with silver. Harry touched it, and felt soft warmth, like rotting meat, bathe his hands.

Except for the silver dogs-head, of course. Harry had to look at that in resignation. It remained cold, and always would.

Harry had had to get away from the celebrations. It seemed that most of the wizarding world *did* believe Voldemort dead, after all, and they had thrown festival after festival until Harry’s mouth hurt from smiling.

And no one who was outside his immediate circle seemed to care about the death that it took to achieve it all.

It was as his own private compact with death and mourning, in a way, that Harry went to the Forbidden Forest one night in the middle of April. He carried a hooked branch with thorns on it, and he carried much more knowledge of the web in question than he had the first time he went, and he carried Blood-Replenishing Potions so he wouldn't lose his life there in the darkness.

And beside him walked Draco.

Draco had said nothing when Harry intimated that he wanted to free thestrals again. He had simply looked at Harry with bright eyes, and then reached over and put a hand on his forehead that felt as if it could strike down as easily as bless. Then he had said, "I'm coming with you."

Harry nodded. "I would expect nothing less of you," he said. "I *need* someone to help me with the Blood-Replenishing Potions. I want to free two thestrals at least this time, but the chains are so long that I'd die before I could shed all the blood necessary to cover and melt them."

"The way you almost did last time," said Draco, in a voice nearly without malice.

Harry inclined his head.

So they had come to the Forbidden Forest, after promising Snape that he could come after them if they weren't back by midnight. The days were getting longer, but there were still hours of darkness before then, and a wintry chill in the air which Harry found appropriate, given their place and their purpose. He walked until he heard the taps of hooves sounding beside him, and turned to face the thestrals trotting towards him, their tails high.

A mare and a foal, he saw at once, and they halted and sniffed when he saw them. Harry could not communicate with them as easily as he had before, now that his phoenix song was gone, but having taken the web and the chain off the stallion, he thought he could do it a second time.

He bared his left arm. His right hand held the thorns that were necessary to cut his skin and shed the blood. The mare at once came towards him, tail flinging itself about like a flag. The foal crowded close to her, halfway, Harry thought, between the innocence that afflicted young magical creatures who'd never seen a wizard and nervousness about what these strange beings might do.

Harry knelt, and examined the web and the chain flowing about their hooves. Draco drew one deep breath, as if he could see them himself. Maybe he could. Then his hand landed in Harry's hair, and latched tight.

Reminding me of what I could lose, if I insisted on falling so far into the web-breaking that I died to free the thestrals. Harry appreciated it. He would have reached up and clasped Draco's hand back if he didn't need both of his for the blood-drawing. As it was, he had to use his magic to lightly, warmly caress Draco's fingers, and hope that would be enough.

A deep breath, and then he drew the bough down his arm.

Blood shed willingly, blood shed with thorns. The first drop made two links of the cold blue chain around the mare and her foal whirl apart into steam, with a slight hiss that was echoed by an ecstatic snort from the mare. It occupied the whole of his mind, and for the first time in nearly a week, Harry found that he could think of something else than how annoyed he was at people calling him a hero.

I did what I had to. Connor was the real hero, the one who made a decision he didn't have to make.

But here, *here* was the work he'd dedicated himself to, not the work prophecies and fate and the hour of his birth had compelled him into, and so he dragged the thorns over and over again through his skin, parting it into ragged slivers and runnels of liquid, and the mare and the foal danced around each other as the chain lifted from their hooves and their necks.

When Harry grew exhausted, he stopped, panting, and leaned against Draco. Draco used his hold in Harry's hair to force a Blood-Replenishing Potion more easily down his throat. Harry gulped, and grimaced a bit at the foul taste, and nodded his thanks to Draco as he moved forward again. Apart from anything else, the support of Draco's hip and thigh against his cheek kept him much warmer and more braced than he'd been the first time he did this.

When he got close in under the mare's belly, she whuffled at his hair and then bent her neck over his shoulder and between his arms to lick at the blood flowing from his wounds. Harry let her do it. The foal wanted a taste, too, and so he rested for a moment, touching the cold, slick short fur. The foal wriggled against him, seeming to have entirely lost its fear. At least when Harry set

them free, they would have no cause to fear wizards again.

On and on and on, until Harry fell into a kind of trance where he dragged and cut and dripped, and only paused every now and then for a drink from one of the vials Draco held. It seemed almost anticlimactic when the final chains disappeared from the pair, and Harry could swallow the remains of their web with his *absorbere* gift. It tore like rotten silk, and left two more thestrals free.

The mare reared high, and her wings turned white. Harry blinked, lifting a hand to shield his eyes. The foal whirled around its mother, snorting and stamping and squealing, and Harry heard a sound like enormous gates of ivory swinging open.

He had expected the mare to mimic the stallion's strange transformation, rearranging her bones, but, he supposed, there was no reason to expect that. Thestrals seemed to be individual creatures, as different from one another as house elves, not a hive like the Many.

The white light whirled like a whip through the Forest, or like the wheel of diamond shards he had used to cut Evan Rosier's face apart. Harry felt the trees shivering in the wake of the enormous *boom* that accompanied its traveling, and lowered his arm to stare in silent disbelief at the burned area where the mare had been.

The foal capered for a moment, then stopped and bowed its head. A moment later, it, too, combusted in white flames that burned bright as magnesium before collapsing on each other.

In the silence that followed, Harry heard Draco swallow heavily and say, "I suppose you know best about what to do, since you're *vates*, Harry, but it's bloody creepy sometimes."

It was time now, and Harry went to the entrance of Silver-Mirror where Draco would be awaiting him. The others had all left for the Walpurgis Dance already—well, at least those who were Dark had—and it had felt decidedly strange not to go. Harry could feel the wild Dark pulling at him, calling him on to the frenzied noise of music and movement of feet. He would be welcome there, it promised him, and it would be more than happy to help him forget.

But the small shard of tame Dark drifting around him helped him forget its mad cousin's invitation. It draped like a stole on his shoulders now, and licked his face with a tongue full of maggots. Harry wiped them off, and nodded to Draco, who waited with a calm expression on his face.

Not that he hadn't fussed when Harry bought pale robes for him, because he had. Harry didn't care. The robes were the color of marble, and made Draco's hair and eyes look exotic, and suited him. He'd bought the golden torque, too, which was almost lost in the ash-blond of Draco's hair, and which complemented the golden Portkey bracelet on his wrist. It was Harry's small revenge, that Draco looked like a creature of the Light this Walpurgis.

And, considering the name of the ritual, not entirely inappropriate.

Draco wore a smile that Harry hadn't seen since the moment just after Connor's funeral, when he had seemed to share Harry's sense of peace in finally laying his brother to rest. "Ready?" he asked softly, extending the hand without the bracelet. The tame Dark surrounded that, too, in a blaze with silver on the inside and black on the outside, the opposite of Harry's piece.

Harry nodded, and put out his own hand, and as their fingers intertwined, the Dark embraced them and took them—elsewhere.

Harry lifted his head and stared, then shivered. In spite of what Draco had told him, and what he'd read to prepare, he still found himself overcome by the sheer power of the room in which they stood. A black, cavernous hall, with a ceiling so lost in shadow that stars dangled from it and didn't seem out of place, and walls of gleaming black stone, veined here and there with silver. Gleams of light near at hand revealed the black was either sleek dark green or at least had some shades of that color in it.

Light...

Harry turned and looked over his shoulder. A silver flame burned in the center of the hall, of course, in mimicry of the silver fire that would burn elsewhere that night as the Walpurgis celebrants danced, and to give the ritual its name. Harry cocked his head. The fires of Walpurgis often felt frosty. He expected to feel that sensation from this flickering, single tongue of flame, which wept sparks like tears to either side.

He didn't. A soft warmth engulfed his body instead, and he closed his eyes against that, and against the silver light that had begun to shine from his skin.

"The Dark encloses us," Draco whispered, the first of his ritual words. "The tame Dark we summoned has created this for us, and will hold us close this night and all the nights to come. My beloved, will you come with me and see the gentleness in the heart of the Dark? For even that which is pitiless may know joy."

Harry nodded, and opened his eyes. Draco shone with glory like lighted obsidian, beaming out of him and making his hair hold soft glints of red, his eyes of green, his robes of black. *He ought to be pleased*, Harry thought inanely. *He gets to look like a proper Dark wizard after all.*

"I will be pleased," he whispered, when he realized he hadn't yet said the words he needed to.

Draco leaned forward and kissed him, then took his hand and drew him towards the fire. It grew warmer as they approached, and Harry found that he couldn't take his eyes from it. He knew the flame would seek out his mind and offer him whatever glimpse of the paths, or the past, or the wild Dark, was most appropriate to his state of mind. Draco had called this the perfect ritual to undergo after a crippling loss, because it complemented the last Walpurgis in which Harry had taken the lead and cared for him, and this time it would focus on unlocking parts of Harry that had lain buried and diminishing those griefs that might keep him from happiness.

And Draco would take the lead. Harry suspected the ritual's magic, as well as Connor's loss, might lie behind his hovering overprotectiveness for the last month.

The flame grew larger and larger, until it consumed the whole of the world. And then it vanished, so suddenly that Harry wondered if it had managed to burn his eyes and lose him his sight. Or perhaps this was one enormous afterimage? Gaps and holes did begin to open in the darkness after a moment, like a spot from the sun slowly and gradually tattering.

And then he saw what lay before him, and lost his breath.

A group of women in dark robes surrounded a low altar of black stone, and on the altar lay flowers, locks of hair, goblets of wine, peaches, the carcass of a goat—

And a young woman with her throat bared.

Harry knew he'd made some noise, but he couldn't tell what it was, whether a word, perhaps his brother's name, or just a sound of distress. He stared in silence as the priestesses chanted, their voice soaring in joy. They didn't speak a language he knew—or even words at all; their voices slid by like water or birdsong—and he did not know which god they praised. He only heard the happiness, and saw the corresponding ecstasy in the young woman's eyes as she tilted back her head.

There could be no doubt that she was offering her life freely. Willingly. She would let her blood be spilled and go to whatever god or power they served because she *wanted* to.

Harry closed his eyes. Why had the ritual believed he needed to see a vision of willing sacrifice? He knew what it meant. He'd lived with it for months now. He'd been willing to *perform* it when he went into Voldemort's lair. And he knew Connor had died of it, had done it because he wanted to.

And when that thought brought black resentment welling to the front of his mind, he knew why the Dark had chosen this sight.

He gave a shudder, and made a low, ugly sound that held fury in it. He hadn't known he felt the fury. Along with all the tears he'd shed, the sad pride that Connor had died that way, the irritation that everyone who hadn't been there seemed to think *Harry* had been the one to defeat Voldemort and not Connor—

There was anger, as pitiless as the voice of a crow, as pitiless as the wild Dark. In part, he *hated* his brother for having done this to him, committed suicide and left him here to mourn.

The silver light gushed from his skin, bending around in front of him, forming two distinct and parallel lines that touched each other like hands clasping, and became the silver flame again. Harry stood in the black room with Draco's arms around him, and his own muscles fighting mindlessly to get free.

Draco hissed into his ear, "He did it because he wanted to, Harry, and while you have every right to be angry, that's the true, the deep reason. Not to make you furious. He didn't steal a death from you that you had the right to die. He died to spare you." He

hesitated for a moment, then said, “And all the people who love you.”

“How can *you* be sure what went through his head?” Harry ripped free and turned to face Draco, his eyes bright and furious. He saw two of Draco’s head, and knew he wept again. He didn’t care. These were tears of fury and frustration, not sadness. “You weren’t there.”

“No,” Draco said. His face looked half in shadow, half in dancing firelight, from the odd radiance that bled through his skin. “But we have something in common that you don’t—or, at least, that you didn’t have in common with us until very recently.”

“What’s that?” Harry snarled.

“Love for you.”

And then Draco kissed him, as intent as Harry had been the night he’d fallen off the mountain, pressing Harry back, to the side of the single flame, and towards a bed that the tame Dark raised from the floor for them. It was a replica of their old bed that had stood in the Slytherin seventh-year boys’ room at Hogwarts, Harry saw, dark green curtains and sheets and all.

He fought, at first. He wanted to fight. But the person he wanted most to scream at was gone from the world, and his rage dashed itself to pieces against the walls of both Draco’s understanding and his firm non-regret. He was sorry that Connor had died. He wasn’t sorry about it in the same way Harry was, and he wouldn’t be. He didn’t wish that Connor were still alive if it meant that he would have traded Harry for him.

Harry clenched his hands, and found himself lying on the sheets. Draco hovered just above him, breath coming short and fast, eyes piercing him.

“Will you let me do this for you?” Draco asked. “You’ve shown me openness. Will you let me show it to you?”

Those questions were part of the ritual. Harry knew it, though he had not known why until now. He shut his eyes and tilted his head back. Sweat slicked his forehead like tears, and he had to clench his teeth to keep screams behind them.

“Yes,” he said, aware that he sounded angry.

It was the permission Draco needed, evidently, not a particular tone. The sheets rose and wrapped themselves around Harry, turning him over twice, and when they let him free again, he was also free of clothes. He huffed out a breath and locked eyes with Draco, making their gaze a challenge. His power still streamed around him, his anger still rose in him, and the silver light made his limbs into swords. He stood a good chance of cutting Draco if they had sex now.

Draco, already naked himself, eyes dark with passion and limbs dark with the obsidian flare, didn’t look as if he cared about that.

He climbed onto Harry and urged him onto his stomach. Harry lifted his head with a gasp of surprise when he realized Draco’s fingers were heavy with more of the frankincense-smelling oil. Had the room given it to him, or the Dark, or had he conjured it himself? Harry didn’t know, and then had no more time to think about it, as Draco carefully smeared the oil over the one patch in the middle of his back that he hadn’t been able to reach.

And Harry found out why they needed the oil, and why the ritual had Flame in its name as well as Silver Splendor.

He shuddered, drowsy heat and gentleness flooding him. The oil had turned to liquid again, and was sliding everywhere on his body, bringing pleasure wherever it went. It didn’t smother his emotions, though, as he had half-feared it would, but only softened the anger, bringing it to full bloom and then bearing it away on a tide of other sensations. Harry bowed his head and huffed again. This time, he was trying to catch his breath.

Draco spoke softly to the nape of his neck, ritual phrase after ritual phrase that Harry didn’t bother paying attention to. He tilted his head back and sighed with relief as tight knots in his muscles that seemed to have been cramped for the last month unwound. Boneless, he dropped to the middle of the bed.

Draco came down with him, and turned his face for a kiss. Harry had to close his eyes, briefly, before the sight of the emotion in his face. Then he opened his eyes and returned the kiss, with interest.

And after that, he lay there while Draco prepared him with the oil, and the silver light swayed back and forth inside him like seaweed moving in a current, or leaves moving in the wind. He had never felt so relaxed, so comfortable, so open and flowing to the emotions within him. When Draco entered him, Harry arched his back and only wished he could prolong the moment.

Harry didn't know how to describe the motion they shared then, other than *motion*. It wasn't fucking, and it wasn't making love, because emotions other than love sped his heartbeat and made his muscles languid and hazed his mind as he lay there. Best to call it motion, and to revel lazily in everything he was feeling.

One feeling never changed, of course: utter and complete trust in Draco. If he'd been hiding any of that, the ritual had successfully dredged it up and used it as a bedrock for the rest of his emotions.

He barely experienced his own orgasm, just a bright, sharp pinprick of pleasure in the middle of the rest, a star falling into the sea. He felt more keenly the moment when Draco gasped, stiffened, and lost himself, because in the next moment he collapsed onto Harry's back and smeared the oil all over himself.

Harry's eyelids fluttered. He should rouse himself. He should ask Draco about the end of the ritual, which he knew involved the tame Dark returning them to the world, but which he wouldn't be awake to see if he kept lying here. He should explain to Draco what this ritual had made him feel, and how the anger had joined the rest of the emotions dancing through him—not something he'd suppressed, but something he wouldn't admit to himself, and which, now, he could admit.

But all that came out of the mixture of embers and ashes filling him now was a dazed mumble of, "I love you."

"The splendor has shone, and the flame has burned," Draco said, the words to end the ritual. Harry felt the room dissolving around them, but he felt, more clearly, Draco lean forward and say into his shoulder, "I love you, too."

Harry flopped, boneless. It was an utter luxury, utterly decadent, and probably encouraged more by the ritual than what he would naturally and normally feel, but, for once, he didn't care:

He would relax and let Draco take care of everything.

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Chapter Eighty-Three: Gloryflower Owls

Hawthorn sniffed deeply, and then shook her head. It was still hard, sometimes, remembering that she'd left her lycanthropy behind. If nothing else, the sense of smell that it had provided her would be quite useful now, as they walked into the Disillusioned tower that contained the Gloryflower owls. She had to place her feet carefully on invisible walkways and clutch at invisible walls and make educated guesses about how low the arches on the doors were, without a sense of smell.

And the softer air of May would even have been kind to her nostrils. One of the very few moments of joy her condition had ever afforded her was sniffing at the air when the seasons were firmly established. Hawthorn had never known *spring* had a scent all its own, or *summer*, but they did, and she missed them.

Then brew a potion that will give you just the keenness of scent back, she sniped at herself, and ducked under the final arch. She heard Lucius, following her, curse softly as his forehead apparently met the stone. She smirked, and then lost the smirk as she straightened and looked around her.

Magic washed around them in soft, cooling waves, but still powerfully enough to make the hair on the back of Hawthorn's neck rise. The owls were compact birds made of gold, with emerald eyes. Hawthorn had seen them before, of course, since she'd voted in several Ministerial elections. Still, she had never seen this many, all crowded close together on small perches, all sleeping and motionless. It would take the touch of the candidates to bring them to life.

She stepped aside so Lucius could make his way into the room. Elizabeth was behind him, and then Laura Gloryflower, and then Cupressus. Hawthorn watched him as he gazed at the sleeping birds in silence. She wondered if he had ever thought he would stand here. It was impossible, most of the time, to tell anything from his face. The first time she had met him after the defeat of Voldemort, he had only nodded to her and remarked how wonderful it was that the battle against the Dark Lord had claimed so few lives.

The death of Voldemort.

Hawthorn stroked her left arm with her right hand. The hair had grown back into the burned place, and most people, even when they demanded a glimpse, couldn't tell where the Dark Mark had once been. When she first stared down through the light, saw the snake and skull had gone, and realized what it meant for her, Hawthorn had locked herself in her office at the Ministry and cried tears that burned her eyes. A chapter of her life she had sought so hard to unwrite was finally gone.

And now she stood here, with the four other candidates for Minister, about to send a flood of owls into the air and ask people to vote for her, or for one of the others standing beside her.

She even thought she had a reasonably good chance of winning.

My loves, her thoughts said, on Pansy and Dragonsbane. *What would you say if you could see me now? Would you be proud? Or would the concerns of the dead occupy you so much that you would only smile at me from behind a veil of mist?*

Elizabeth Nonpareil's nasal voice interrupted her reflections. "Is it right for her to be here?" she complained. Hawthorn turned, sure the insufferable woman would be complaining about her presence, only to see her glaring at Laura. "Her family made these owls, after all. Are we quite sure she won't tamper with them?"

Laura gave Elizabeth a smile that had a hint of the lioness behind it. "The owls themselves will protect the honesty of the candidates," she said. "That is part of the magic on the Tower. You may believe me willing to undercut the election, Mrs. Nonpareil, but I assure you I could not even if I wished to."

Elizabeth's nose stuck a little higher in the air.

Hawthorn shook her head. She was aware of the effort some of Elizabeth's own family had gone to to rescue her image and promote her as a viable candidate in the election, but there were some things money couldn't do.

"We all need to touch an owl," she said, and nodded to the others. Lucius had already arranged himself a bit further down the line of golden birds, a hand extended to the nearest one's breast. Elizabeth and Laura fanned out beyond him, still trading hostile looks. Cupressus strode to an owl almost the opposite of Hawthorn's and stood waiting, blinking occasionally.

Hawthorn returned the glance. Of all the candidates, she was the most comfortable with him. They didn't share an allegiance, nor even a generation, but they had the same attitude towards life. They cared most about Britain having a Minister, for example, rather than their own triumphs.

Cupressus gave her a little nod, but that might have been her imagination. At any rate, Hawthorn was not surprised when his hand struck his owl and began the circle of power that woke the birds up.

It was truly astounding to watch life flare in jeweled eyes, feathers shift, heads turn and orient on the candidates. Hawthorn shivered. She had cured lycanthropy, at least in potential, and she had used blood curses to kill and wound, and she had bred plants, but all those worked with materials originally alive in the first place. To call motion out of nothing but metal and magic—

That made her want to learn another art.

Hawthorn tamed her ambition as well as she could. For now, she would content herself with watching the birds, satisfied that the people come before them had the right to stir them, turn and leap out the windows. The air filled with a storm of golden wings that the Muggles below would see as nothing more than a gleam of sunlight, and the flock broke over London, clumps of them shredding as they sped in different directions, going to every wizard seventeen and older.

Hawthorn became aware that Lucius was beside her, staring after the birds in quiet satisfaction. *Perfect*. She would have made some excuse to draw him to the window if he had hung back, but now she didn't need to. He was in the perfect position to see what happened next, and she was in the perfect position to watch his face.

Another storm of owls unfolded into the air from the middle of London—from Gringotts. They appeared identical in every way to the old birds, and where the streams crossed, it became impossible to tell them apart.

Lucius's jaw fell gently open. He shut it almost at once, but Hawthorn could not have asked for a more satisfying reaction.

"Where did those owls come from?" he asked through gritted teeth, too stunned to be polite.

"Those are the owls that will allow the magical creatures to vote," Hawthorn said innocently. "Forged by Gloryflower artisans, with goblin help, and given all the necessary enchantments that the old ones have—to only produce one ballot per bird, for example."

Lucius looked half-ill now.

“Oh, dear,” Hawthorn said, as if this had only just occurred to her. “No one told you the goblins and the others were voting, did they?” She paused. “And you said many things in your speeches alienating them. How sad.”

She moved away from him, and leaned against the far wall to wait. The owls were all to return by the evening, and they would produce five piles of ballots when they did, one for each candidate. Those piles would then need to be counted by *everyone*, and their numbers compared and tallied.

She sat in a place where she could watch Lucius’s expression.

Killing him for the revenge she was still owed was no fun, she had decided, and in any case, it was quite impossible to arrange for the death of Lucius Malfoy in such a way that his son and Harry wouldn’t find out. Much better to cut him to pieces with the tools of politics, and in ways that he never saw coming.

Owen sighed as the owl landed on the table in front of him, and then glanced at Faustine Nonpareil, who sat in a chair across from him. She looked up and raised her eyebrows.

“Do you think I should vote for Elizabeth?” Owen asked, well-aware of how hopeless he sounded. “We did our best to make her a candidate someone would approve of. I almost feel I owe her this vote, in the name of solidarity.”

“I think you should do whatever you desire,” said Faustine calmly, taking her own ballot from the open beak of the owl that had landed next to her. “I will certainly not tell you how *I* vote.” She scribbled down the name with a flourish, shoulder ostentatiously hunched so he couldn’t look over her arm.

Owen looked down at his own piece of parchment, and then at the owl, who shifted from one clawed foot to the other and had no advice to offer. He bit his lip several times, and, in the end, followed the desire of his heart, the way Faustine had said he should. *Merlin knows I have had enough of duty for a lifetime.*

Michael’s face flashed before his eyes.

Owen put it gently aside. He had accepted that he would often be thinking of his brother, but he would not let the grief that image and name invoked control his actions. He wrote *Hawthorn Parkinson* down and handed the ballot back to the owl. It clapped its wings with a small *clang*, as though thanking him for the vote, and swallowed the parchment, which would come to rest in its belly. Then it turned and climbed out of the room in a dizzying sweep.

Faustine’s owl was right behind it. Owen wondered for a moment if that meant the name she’d written was longer than his, and tried to compare the length of the names in his mind, and then shook his head. It could just mean that she was a slower writer, or that she’d taken a bit longer to remember how to spell a certain name.

He didn’t intend to dwell on it. He turned back to the parchment in front of him, which contained suggestions to forge the Dark families into more of a united front for political action. “And you think we can persuade the Black Heron to our side with monetary assistance alone?”

Harry raised an eyebrow at Draco as he tucked the list of locations back into his robe pocket. “You’re sure that you want to come with me? It’s going to be a nasty, bumpy ride, with constant Side-Along Apparitions, and we’ll barely stay in one place long enough to have tea, except the Forest.”

“You wouldn’t do that on your own.” Draco folded his arms. “With me along, you’ll be forced to take care of my comfort, and that means that you’ll be forced to take care of your own.”

Harry frowned at him. “I’m eating and sleeping regularly, Draco. For those first three days—back—I did nothing *but* eat and sleep.”

“And talk to me,” said Draco, his face and voice growing perceptibly more smug. “I know which one *I* credit your recovery to.”

Harry bit off an impatient groan, and ended up shaking his head. “You haven’t said if you mind the Side-Along Apparitions.”

“Of course I mind them. You still can’t do it gracefully. And believe me, I do intend to complain about them.”

“You can’t be *easy*,” Harry said darkly, while wings briefly sparked above his shoulders before falling into oblivion. He was reasonably sure he should not be grinning like an idiot at the same time.

“If I was easy, then you’d know I was Polyjuiced.” Draco stepped forward and leaned his face against Harry’s, not kissing him. “Come on, hero. Let’s do your Side-Along Apparitions. I’ve already voted, so I’m not worried about my owl having to chase me all over Britain.”

Harry nodded, and slung an arm around Draco’s shoulder. He carried a precise list of Apparition coordinates for every place in the British Isles where intelligent magical serpents lived. He would have to go to them and translate their votes from Parseltongue for the owls. The magical birds had provisions to record voice votes for those who couldn’t write, but they didn’t understand the snake language, and Lucius, the only other one who could have helped, was a candidate and had to remain in the Tower the owls came from while the election continued.

Harry had voted already himself, for Hawthorn. He hadn’t asked whom Draco had voted for. It would be a hard enough choice between the Dark candidates he thought might do a good job, a Light candidate he might favor for sheer sense but feel constrained from voting for because of his allegiance, and his father.

“I am here! I have voted!”

Harry looked down in surprise. The arrangement had been that he would return to Silver-Mirror this evening and collect Argutus’s vote, because the Omen snake had been unable to decide whom he wanted for Minister. But here came Argutus with a piece of parchment held firmly in his mouth and an owl fluttering after him, clacking its beak and trying to take the parchment away.

“How in the world did you manage to write this?” Harry asked, taking the parchment from Argutus’s snout. The owl came and sat firmly on his shoulder, staring fixedly at the ballot. Harry shifted so that his hair stroked it, and unfolded the parchment. The writing was shaky, but clear. *Laura Gloryflower*.

“I have learned to write now!” Argutus swayed his head proudly from side to side. *“Letters are not as complicated as runes, and I have learned to mimic them with a quill held in my tail! And soon I will understand English!”*

Harry couldn’t help but smile, at least in the moment before the owl leaped, snapped the ballot from his hand, swallowed it, and coasted out the window. Argutus hissed in disappointment. *“I wanted Draco to see my writing,”* he said.

“Write it again today,” Harry assured him, slipping his arm through Draco’s. “You can show it to him when we come back.”

“And you’ll make him look at it?” Argutus tapped his tail in a meaningful pattern on the floor. So far as he was concerned, there had been many important things to show Draco in the three days immediately after Connor’s death when he was cooped up with Harry, but Draco had turned him away each time, unable to understand the Parseltongue and worried that the Omen snake would disturb Harry.

“I promise.”

Argutus bobbed his head, his approximation of a human nod, and slithered away. Harry looked around to see a slightly stunned expression in Draco’s eyes.

“Harry,” Draco begged quietly, “please tell me that your snake didn’t just vote.”

“Of course he did,” said Harry, a bit surprised. Draco had been in on the secret of the new Gloryflower voting owls; Harry would never shut him out from anything that important. “You knew he was going to.”

“I was picturing a vote translated from Parseltongue. Not—writing.” Draco gave a slight shudder. “He will read my letters and probably write one himself, if he takes the fancy. Merlin, Harry, sometimes your snakes are more than a bit frightening.”

“Says the one who got me this one,” Harry retorted, clasped his hand around Draco’s arm, and Apparated to the Forbidden Forest.

Syrinx gazed thoughtfully at the parchment in front of her. Had this been two months ago, she would have put down her cousin’s name. She had owed her everything, from the shared Gloryflower name to the fact that Laura had agreed to put her with Harry as

a sworn companion.

But her mind had changed since then, quite literally. She was in the next-to-last phase of war witch training now, reintegrating herself with the world, learning to think things she had never thought. She was no longer tempted to vote for Laura simply because she was family. Syrinx had listened to her, and while Laura was a brave warrior, politics was not war. It had different rules and different requirements, and sometimes Syrinx thought Laura hadn't realized there was no longer a Voldemort to be fought. There were people as bad, perhaps, but without that magical power to make themselves known, there was no Voldemort on the horizon.

So she thought about what she believed, sitting by the upper window of Silver-Mirror's library in a flood of sunlight, and what Laura believed, and what the other candidates believed. The owl sat beside her, wanting the ballot but content to wait for however long it took her to decide. There were rumors of an election in the last century where the owl had waited two weeks for an old, deaf witch to have the positions of the candidates explained to her in detail several dozen times.

In the end, Syrinx wrote down *Cupressus Apollonis*, and the owl beside her began to hop from foot to foot like a small child who had to use the loo. Syrinx smiled and held out the parchment. With a little hoot of comfort, the bird snatched it from her fingers and sped out the window. Syrinx sat back to watch it go with a smile that would have been impossible for her before Harry became her anchor.

Harry knelt down next to the Many hive and hissed at the entwined ball of snakes. Draco raised his eyebrows. He could accept Argutus as a single being, nearly as intelligent as themselves though in a different way, and certainly it was even easier with the magical creatures who had some semblance of human form, like the centaurs, but he would never find the many minds spread among dozens of tiny golden-green cobras anything but alien.

Harry nodded, and then spoke softly to one of the owls who hovered overhead. Draco shook his head when he heard the name of Elizabeth Nonpareil. Ah, well, it was to be accepted that magical creatures who had never voted before would make mistakes; they might be impressed with the sound of her name in Parseltongue, or the impression that she had many eggs, or anything else that Harry had neglected to explain to make them understand just how unsuitable a Minister she would make.

When he had first heard that Harry would be translating Parseltongue votes for the magical snakes, Draco had assumed that this was a prime opportunity to throw a few more votes behind Hawthorn. Harry had stared at him for a moment, then told him he was merely *collecting* the votes, not assuring them. He would make as great an effort as he could to insure that he represented all the candidates fairly and the snakes could choose among them, just as if they were human and could read or enter the human debate about them in English.

On some things, Draco had concluded, he and Harry would never agree. He could understand, in an abstract manner, why Harry wanted to be fair, but politics wasn't fair, and they should use any advantage they could get. It wasn't as though anyone else would be present who could understand the votes and insist that a snake had said Elizabeth when Harry could pretend that it had said Hawthorn. This was the first election with magical creatures voting. Harry should guide them.

Harry had hissed at him when he suggested that, something that Draco was quite sure was an insult in Parseltongue, and stalked away. Draco shrugged. He himself had voted for Hawthorn, and done his part to secure a better future for wizarding Britain. She was the best of them, the most able and the most flexible and the most trusted by the other people in Harry's alliance. It was not his fault if Harry tried to undercut that and ended up cutting Hawthorn out of office.

When the Many hives had finished giving Harry their votes, the Runespoors came forward and did so. That drove Draco quite mad, because the three heads of every snake had to agree, and that often took minutes of debate, or what sounded like debate: sharp hisses and two heads combining to threaten the other. Luckily, the list of locations they had to visit after this was not long. There were other Omen snakes living in Britain as friends of wizards, a few more scattered colonies of Runespoors, and apparently a crossbred snake of some kind in the north of Scotland that was rumored to have hydra blood. They would go to the shores of Loch Ness and call out, but Draco doubted that the kelpie in the lake would come to them wearing the form of a giant snake, or would be interested in voting if it did. It was far more likely to drown them.

A movement on the edge of his peripheral vision caught his attention, and he turned sharply. A small shape slid through the undergrowth, coming closer. Draco warily drew his wand. No matter what Harry thought, not all magical creatures were friendly to wizards, and some mindless magical snakes, incapable of voting, did live in the Forest and might be as happy to bite the votes as anyone.

The leaves at his feet stirred aside, and the golden-and-black shape of a Locusta revealed itself, coiled so that the broken skull-

and-crossbones signs on its scales were visible. It hissed something in Parseltongue to Harry, who had just turned away from the last Runespoor.

Harry caught his breath and went very still.

He still misses Sylarana, Draco thought, lowering his wand as the snake danced and hissed but made no move to attack. *He savors loss like a fine wine. I don't think he'll get over his brother any time soon.*

It wasn't that Draco had *wanted* Harry to stop thinking about Connor, exactly, so much as that he had not wanted grief to poison him. But if Harry reacted this way to the mere sight of a Locusta snake, who knew how long it would take him to stop freezing when his brother's name came up in conversation?

Harry had a slightly dazed expression on his face as he hissed back. Then he turned to an owl and said, "Laura Gloryflower." The owl flew back towards London at once.

"Laura *Gloryflower*?" Draco said, as he found his voice. "Why is a Dark snake voting for a Light witch? You did explain to it that she's of a different allegiance than it is, right?"

"He," Harry said absently, still seeming dazed. "And yes, I explained that. He doesn't care. He rather thought the family of the creator of these owls should be his choice." He licked his lips, and seemed to be avoiding Draco's gaze. Draco felt his eyes narrow suspiciously. "And, um, well, his name is Yaraliss."

"Yes?" Draco said, as neutrally as he could.

"Yes." Harry hesitated a moment longer, then extended his arm. The Locusta slithered happily up it, and curled around so that his head rested on Harry's shoulder. Draco found himself confronted with a pair of green eyes, at least as bright as Harry's, or as Sylarana's. "And he's decided that he's coming home with me."

Draco shivered. He didn't fancy sharing the house with an extremely venomous snake who would demand as much of Harry's attention and time as Sylarana had. "And you think that's a good idea?"

Harry avoided his gaze even as he stroked the golden-black scales. Yaraliss wriggled in pleasure. "He absolutely promises to get along with Argutus, and not to bite anyone unless they try to attack me. Really," he added, when Draco opened his mouth. "That's what he said, and we even defined 'attack' so he won't bite someone who, well, tries to hug me exuberantly."

"Harry—" Draco began.

Harry looked up at him through his fringe. "I really want him to come with me," he said in a tiny voice.

Oh, for Merlin's sake. Draco sighed. "Just remember what happened last time, and don't let him intertwine that deeply into your mind," he said.

"Oh, Yaraliss is more interested in the outer world than—she was," Harry said softly, and touched the Locusta behind his head. He wriggled again, but Draco thought there was a smug spitefulness in the green eyes that Harry's other snakes *definitely* did not have. "He won't blackmail me the way she did."

Seeing the helpless adoration in Harry's eyes, Draco decided that he was doomed and might as well give in now. He shook his head as the Locusta said something imperious-sounding to Harry and slithered into a pocket, then stepped forward and leaned on Harry's shoulder. "Where are we going next?"

Lucius lifted his head. The last of the owls had flown into the room, and the Tower was filled with softly stirring bodies and cooing voices. At least they did not have the shed feathers and dust of real birds, he thought.

The owls cocked their heads forward and spat out ballots. They flew into five neat piles—one for each candidate, Lucius knew. He had heard the stories of this, and even known that he might stand here someday, though he had certainly never believed it would be at the end of the first election in which magical creatures could vote—

He cut the thought off sharply.

A number of owls hovered above the ballots for a moment, then separated and flew to certain piles. Those would be the owls with the voice votes translated from Parseltongue, Lucius knew, and sometimes owls who contained votes by wizards and witches who couldn't write.

“Well,” said Hawthorn in a falsely bright voice, when they had sat there for some minutes contemplating the folded parchments. “Shall we?” She stepped forward to one of the larger piles, which was surely hers. The others moved as confidently towards the piles that would have their names on them. They would count the parchments for their names, then move and count those for the other names. Magic in the Gloryflower owls themselves would insure their counts were as honest as could be—prevent them from lying about the numbers, at least, though not from miscounting.

It did not escape Lucius's notice that his pile was smaller than anyone else's, save Elizabeth Nonpareil's.

He told himself that was because the wizarding population of Britain was reduced right now, with many people fled and others dead.

He did not believe it himself.

Bending over his own pile and beginning the count, he coldly acknowledged to himself that he had made mistakes, and those would have to change. No, he had truly not expected to win the election, but he had expected to do better than this—better than Laura Gloryflower, for instance, who had depended on her name to carry her through too much of her campaign. He intended to use this as a rung up the political ladder, and if he could not do that, he had failed in far more than simply losing the election.

In silence, they counted, and switched piles, and counted again. Lucius could feel his cheeks burn when he saw how much larger Hawthorn's pile was than his own—by more than a thousand ballots. He did not look up, and he hoped that none of the others saw his flush.

In the end, there could be no doubt. Elizabeth Nonpareil still looked stunned that she had lost, and Laura Gloryflower thoughtful over the fact that more people had voted for a Dark witch and former Death Eater than had voted for her. Therefore, it was Hawthorn's task to incline her head and say, “Congratulations, Minister,” to Cupressus Apollonis.

Apollonis accepted the declaration with no more than a nod, which was like him. Lucius turned away before they could lock eyes. He despised the new Minister not because he was weak, but because he was the very epitome of Light, the opposite of everything that Lucius stood for.

“Shall we go down and announce this to them?” Apollonis asked, and the other candidates nodded. Reporters would be waiting at the foot of the Tower—they probably had been as soon as they saw the owls fly back, Lucius knew. The others turned and left the room.

Lucius lingered where he was for a moment, looking out over Muggle London. One by one, lights came to life, shining, and Lucius curled his lip. *Not torches, not Lumos charms. Our worlds are separate, and better by far that they stay that way.*

Currently, he was thinking less of the lost election than the fact that he had recognized his son's handwriting on a vote for Hawthorn.

There was still work to be done to restore his reputation and name, that was clear.

But there was no one better to do it.

With silent dignity, resolved to do even better than he had in the past, Lucius turned and made his way down, composing answers in his mind all the while for such critical questions as, “What do you feel about magical creatures voting for the Minister, Mr. Malfoy?” He would answer that of course they had a place in magical Britain, and he had accepted that things must take their course. It balanced between his old position, which no one believed he would so easily abandon, and the future that was coming now.

It was time for a change.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Snapshots

If there were a camera that could take pictures evocative of life amid the ruins and the flowers of Voldemort's defeat, these are

the kinds of pictures it might produce.

*

A photograph of a young woman, showing her pregnancy, entering a vault where two stone statues stand: a woman, and a child in her arms. When she speaks the proper words, golden and silver light races around the statue, and tears open stone to reveal the flesh beneath. The woman shakes her head, and shivers, and blonde hair spills free of its confinement. The girl in her arms clears her throat and says, “Millicent?” in blurred but understandable tones.

Millicent Bulstrode hugs her mother and her sister, and in silence and gladness welcomes them back into the world.

*

A series of photographs, showing Floo connections and stubborn faces, both of them framed by bright hair. Sometimes a third face comes and goes from the pictures—the face of a patient, long-suffering woman. Honoria Pemberley keeps her promise of trying to reconcile Cupressus Apollonis and his daughter.

It will take years, it will take many more photographs, to show the whole process. But if they did not want this to happen, Ignifer and Cupressus should never have allowed Honoria to pick up the camera.

*

An American wizard is visible in this picture, come to Britain to speak to the vates about the magical sea serpents that the Americans have kept fenced in several deep lakes, and what should be done about them. Yet he does not dominate the picture, nor does Harry Black, who has come ceremoniously out of Silver-Mirror to greet him. The ones who do are a tall blond wizard with eyes more gray than blue, and a younger wizard with eyes more blue than gray. They stand in the corner of the picture, and stare at each other as if locked in a duel of stares alone.

The photograph after that one would show the younger wizard moving to greet the ambassador from America before his father could. It would not be entirely clear whether Lucius Malfoy stepped aside of his own free will or was “convinced” to do so, but those who cared to could read their own answers in the slight bow of his head, and the fact that it would be directed at his son.

*

A photograph of two documents, made before they are sent to the Ministry. One is on thick, heavy parchment, burnished to a golden-cream color, and contains carefully penned phrase after carefully penned phrase. It is full of solemn promises from Harry Black to guard the Potter estates and vaults as if they were his own, to search for and train a suitable heir to them, and only to use the money from the vaults in pursuit of a comfortable life for the heir once he finds him or her.

The second document is much simpler: the form to tell the Ministry of a change of name. It simply says that, from now on, Harry James Black wishes to be known as Harry Polaris Black.

The line requesting a reason for the change says, in writing that looks as if it were done in haste, or by a hand trembling with embarrassment: *Polaris is the guide star, the north star. I would be that for people if I can—a sign to lead them home, one they can follow if they wish to.*

*

An oddly-shaped coffin dominates this picture, which shines in hues so rich it could be a painting. And why should it not be? The scene is a hillside vivid with flowers and with trees in blossom, a sheltered magical sanctuary where harsh winds never come and only time will take the flowers from the branches. The trees will bear apples. They curve in around the coffin as if sheltering it from the harsh gaze of the world, which will not understand.

The coffin is made of dark wood, as is traditional when burying one of the Bulstrode line, but very much larger than it needs to be to hold one body. It might, possibly, hold two bodies lying across each other—a man and a woman, say. As if a couple had gone down entwined in madness and bloody death, and it did not seem right to separate them in burial.

*

This comes from the *Daily Prophet*, and shows an old woman calm and gratified by her reception at the Ministry; readers will know that is so, because the article accompanying the picture proclaims it. She is, visibly, not human. Faint spots cover her body.

She sports a tail. Green eyes stare back at the camera as Augusta Longbottom shows off her nonhuman heritage, as well as the fact that the Ministry is fully committed to protecting the rights of half-human wizards.

By her side, beaming, stands her grandson Neville, who seems considerably more excited than she does.

*

Brightness emanates from this picture. Its source might as easily be the young woman's smile as the sheen of her long red hair. She stands with her older brother's hand on his shoulder, and there is an expression of sturdy pride on his face. Ginny Weasley waves a document above her head, fast enough that it's hard to see what the writing on it is.

In the second picture, she stands still and looks a bit sheepish, document unfolded before her so that others can read it. It states that the Ministry, based on a series of preliminary exams, intends to accept her into their new Auror program once she finishes a term at the rebuilt Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ron Weasley, behind her, looks as proud of her as ever, but also rather worn. That might be attributed to the long series of arguments with their family that undoubtedly preceded this picture.

*

This picture is dark, blurry, and difficult to see. Oddly enough, one must hold it up to moonlight to glimpse everything in it, and no one is likely to do that. Luckily, it rests in the possession of one who knows what to do with it, because he took it.

Properly illuminated, it shows the sliver of a moon just come in from the new, and dark, winged shapes in flight. The remnants of blue chains, perhaps, newly shattered, trail from their hooves. One does not need to have seen someone die, because the cutting of their chains and their web changed that about them. Free thestrals, the last remnants of the herd in the Forbidden Forest, they arch over the black landscape below and head towards some destination unknown and unimaginable to humans. On the far side of the photograph, one can just make out the hindquarters of the flight's leader passing through what looks like an open door.

*

How one views this picture would depend on how one feels about the headline that accompanies it. Cupressus Apollonis stands calmly on the steps of the Ministry, holding up what appears to be an ordinary Pensieve. That is all. That the image could be the subject of so much controversy seems astounding.

The headline, of course, explains matters. Rather than construct a prison of torment in the manner of Azkaban, or one of boredom and slow, creeping madness such as Tullianum was, the new Minister has chosen a different approach. Through the modification of a spell first invented by Draco Malfoy, criminals will share their victim's pain at the crime—living through the horror of a rape, for example, or the pitiless fear of confronting a thief who threatens their children to make them hand over money. If the victim is dead, the spell will capture family members' and friends' emotions, and make the criminal understand exactly what he has taken from the world.

This punishment of empathy is to be repeated until the criminal fully comprehends what he has done, or repents—or, sometimes, both of those things. Prison awaits only those who will not repent, who are in danger of doing it again.

*

It might be best to show four of these photographs, though three would be sufficient to tell the story.

The first shows a pair of snakes nose-to-nose. One is much larger than the other, but the smaller one does not look intimidated. Indeed, since the larger one has the gently shimmering color of an Omen snake, and the smaller the gold-black scales of a Locusta, it could be said that size does not correspond to deadliness among this pair.

The second shows them curled on a bed together, carefully side-by-side but not far apart. Feeling each other out, as it were. Seeing how much space is necessary between them when they both wish to nap. The careful observer will note that the space is about as much as a human body would take up.

The third photograph is the liveliest. The Locusta lunges at a figure out of sight, beyond the border of the picture. The Omen snake has clamped his mouth down around his tail and holds tight. It is clear that, in a moment, the Locusta will snap taut and fall on the bed—and, probably, turn and strike from embarrassment or spite at the snake who prevented him from biting someone else.

The last in the series shows the snakes calmly tangled together on the bed, a smirking black skull on gold just barely visible over

an expanse of scales like milk. Both heads are out of sight, submerged in the tumble of coils. It seems the dispute has resolved with not only no one being poisoned, but a new friendship occurring.

Beneath the photographs, tacked on a wall, someone has written a caption.

Never let it be said that Argutus can't make friends with anyone he likes. Or that Yaliss doesn't admire bravery.

*

This scene would seem violent to anyone who does not know the story. Thomas Rhangnara brings down a book with careful force and excellent precision on the head of a young girl whom people might guess is his daughter, if they squint.

The next photograph is even more enigmatic. It consists of nothing but a scroll of difficult math problems, all of them with correct answers.

But the third photograph, which shows father and daughter dancing through the Black library and upsetting shelves, must show a wealth of happiness, even if the means by which they reached it is not quite visible.

*

It takes an inquiring mind to suspect *much* from this photograph, truly. And the kind of mind one has will determine what inference one makes beyond the mere inquiry.

Owen Rosier-Henlin has his mouth open, obviously giving an important speech; the photograph is from the *Vox Populi*, and probably bears some radical, angry article along with it. Next to him stands Faustine Nonpareil, carefully contriving to look as unimpressed as possible. She has her arms folded, and her gaze divided between the photographer—or audience—and Owen.

One might inquire whether she looks at Owen as if she would like to stab him, or as if she appreciates what he is doing.

*

This picture is a blur of movement, and it will take more than one look to sort out the participants. Both have golden hair, both move fast, and both have extended blades in their hands, rather than the more usual wands.

By staring closely, one might decide that both are women, and that one is younger than the other by virtue of her size, and that they are most probably related.

It is, in fact, a picture of Syrinx Gloryflower dueling Laura, and managing to surprise her older cousin more than once. She has begun the penultimate phase of a war witch's training, and Laura admits, in the movement of her body and her blade, that Syrinx will be a formidable one.

*

The room is covered in spilled liquid—mostly silver, but with glimpses of purple and red mixed here and there. Crushed swan feathers litter the foreground, since the picture was taken, or might have been taken, by someone stretched full-length on the floor. Two women draw more attention than the swan feathers, however. One, with her head bowed and her long hair falling over her face, is anonymous. The other, kneeling in front of her with her hands on her shoulders, will be familiar to anyone who reads the *Daily Prophet* as Hawthorn Parkinson.

The next day, this photograph, or one very like it, will run under the byline of Rita Skeeter, and the headline of *Lycanthropy Potion Cures Delilah Gloryflower*.

*

As if in defiance of the fact that a lycanthropy cure exists in the world, the two werewolves run through the picture, at the head of a large and mingled pack. The full moon is just visible in faint shadows across their fur and a pale light that seems to shine from the ground beneath their paws more than the sky above them. Both move with the easy assurance of those bitten in childhood, those who have been werewolves for years.

One werewolf is large, gray, and male, with amber eyes; he becomes a human named Remus Lupin when the moon is not full, but more and more he accepts *this* form as part of his true self. The second, slightly smaller, is black, female, and has dark eyes; she

will be Peregrine when the moon relents, and she is learning the virtues of cooperation between the London packs and with the wizarding world, now that the Ministry is paying attention and acting properly.

For now, though, there is the moon, and the run, and all the smells visible to a werewolf's nose.

*

Probably, the subject of this photograph would not have wanted it to be taken. He would prefer to be caught in a happier moment, not now, as he is, crying and turning his face away.

From thinking of oneself as a sacrifice to leaping into power is a long distance. Peter Pettigrew did not know what to do with himself when the Wizengamot told him that, based on consultations with Hogwarts's surviving students and those professors who wish to return to the school, they chose him to be Headmaster.

In time, in a few moments, he will be able to smile. But not now.

*

There are few photographs like this one, because word spread among the newspapers quickly: *stay away from Harry Black's foster father*. Only Dionysus Hornblower, who is immune to fear, regularly sends his people to take pictures of Severus Snape now.

Snape strides along a rocky path, which the knowledgeable are aware leads to one of the hidden Black houses—sanctuary for the *vates* and those close to him when they don't wish to deal with the press. His cloak billows behind him, and his face is set into a scowl. It doesn't appear as though the acclaim lately fallen onto his shoulders, as people praise him for raising the *vates* and pushing through the trial that led to the ending of his birth parents' influence over him and, ultimately, the revelation of Headmaster Dumbledore's crimes, has changed him.

What changes Severus Snape moves far beneath the surface. Thus Dionysus Hornblower, along with a few select others, believes, and he is determined to capture one of the moments when the miracle happens.

Severus Snape is unchangeable. Thus most of the other reporters, even the daring and truth-committed Rita Skeeter, believe.

*

This photograph is not precious for its rarity. While Harry Black is still, often, shy of the camera, Draco Malfoy is quite ready to pose by himself, and answer questions, and—the clever are coming to realize this—mine information from the person talking to him with his own “innocent” assertions.

But this photograph is precious because it shows the Malfoy heir not smiling, or smirking, or wearing one of the serious expressions that come up when he discusses politics. Instead, he stands on a shore and looks at the waves with a solemn, unguarded expression, as if he wanted to know an answer they will never give him.

In his hand he holds a clutch of flowers—narcissus, and snapdragons. There are not many who know that he comes every week, quiet and alone, to place them on his brother-in-law's grave.

*

Flames burst skyward, arching as if eager to escape from the darkness at their heart, their edges rippling and shedding shimmers of heat far into the air. Harry Black stands to one side of the pyre and watches it, face stern. When necessary, he adds more magic to the fire so it will burn hotter.

Thus, unmourned, thoroughly burned, the ashes willed to vanish and not to scatter, the last remnant of Voldemort passes out of the world.

*

Lazuli Yaxley, intertwined with shadows, kneels beside her daughter. They are digging in a garden, planting a rose together. Jacinth is laughing. Since the establishment of the new Ministry, and the visits she and her mother have made there a few times, without her father, she has known something like happiness.

The second photograph shows a banner draped around the rose, now a flourishing bush, the petals open and aided, probably, by the application of magic. The banner bears the symbol of the House of Yaxley: a thorn tree in front of a rising full moon. The letters beneath the symbol are small, almost unnoticeable against the colors of the banner and the living glory of the bush, but present: *In memory of a sister beloved, and gone too soon.*

*

Cupressus Apollonis is careful. One can indeed say that for him. He does not simply run tests for those who might become Aurors in the future, he does not simply snatch up talented newcomers who might prove to be what he needs, he seeks out and hires those who, involved in disputes with the Ministry, left in the last year before Minister Scrimgeour fell.

Thus, among the Aurors standing stiffly on the front steps of the Ministry in this official photograph are Nymphadora Tonks, who looks more than a little uncertain—

And Alastor Moody, who never looks uncertain about anything.

*

This is quite a large and beautiful room in the Ministry, with space for many wizards to stand. Doors along the walls lead to other rooms, made, from their dark wood and their vaguely furtive air, to hold secrets. A number of men and women stand beside the doors, gray hoods pulled back to reveal their faces.

In the center sits the Stone, currently projecting a dragon's head. The head holds a placard in its mouth, proclaiming exultantly, *I know what right and wrong are now!*

*

Harry Black looks more than a little stiff and out of place in this picture. The other personages around him—the Ministers of France, Spain, and Portugal; Cupressus Apollonis; Evamaria Gansweider, the Minister of Austria—are far more used to ceremonies and official occasions and people being interested in what they have to say.

The banner above them proclaims, in five different languages, the creation of a new and smaller union of countries that will stand slightly apart from the International Confederation. In particular, the banner continues, this organization will investigate new models of wizard-Muggle interaction and coexistence, the ethical ramifications of using *Obliviate* on Muggles, and the creation of Ministries in which being beyond the influence of Lords and Ladies is the first concern.

It is notable as one of the few photographs, official or otherwise, in which Evamaria Gansweider is smiling.

*

This is a private photograph, not meant to be widely shared. Tybalt Starrise sits in silence, with a sober face, for once, above a diary. The diary documents the relationship between his mother Alba and her twin brother Augustus. He had not really known, before then, that his mother was his uncle's anchor, and what happened to his sanity when she died.

His partner John stands beside him, gently touching his shoulder. Tybalt's cousin Portia, currently being reared as the heir to the Starrise properties, stands next to him, barely tall enough to put her chin over the table, and pats his hand.

The photograph is put in a private book, and beneath the picture is written, *To be looked at when I think I know everything about a person.*

*

Calibrud Opalline and her father face each other across an expanse of stone which is the threshold to their home made of a dragon skeleton, Gollrish Y Thie. Calibrud's arm rests across her stomach, and she looks as stubborn as a mule. Paton has one hand over his eyes.

It appears that his daughter is pregnant, and will not tell him who the father of her child is. This is not a great problem, save that Paton wishes to welcome the father into the Opalline clan, and Calibrud is making it impossible.

But then, his daughter has made his life difficult in many ways since her birth more than twenty years ago.

Not far from both of them is a chair, not fully included in the picture, from which a leg projects. The leg might, with a little squinting, be perceived to have the black ridges that are a sign of dragonfire burning. Though it took long recovery in the Sanctuary, Doncan Opalline has returned to his home, and his appointed task of guarding his sister, at last.

*

This photograph is the most blurred and uncertain of them all—just a glimpse of turning face, fluttering hair, shut eyes. The *focus* of the picture is a woman and her child posed proudly in front of Madam Malkin's, where the child has gone to be fitted for her first formal robe, but someone has cut them out and focused on this turning figure instead.

The figure resembles, in certain respects, Fiona Mallory, the former Auror who tortured the Potters, and then was locked into a coma by Lucius Malfoy, released by Unspeakables, and sent Merlin-knows-where.

Despite hunts made by the person who now holds the photograph, Harry Black, no other trace of her has been uncovered.

*

Parvati leans against her parents, who both stand with an arm around her shoulders. Beside her is Padma, holding her hand with a grip that says the world can try to tear her twin sister away from her, but this would not be very smart of the world.

There are signs that the drifting shadows across Parvati's eyes, though they will always be present in some capacity, are beginning to melt into peace.

*

Hermione Granger and Miriam Smith stand facing each other across a table scattered with parchment. Hermione's face is flushed, but her chin high. She wears the silver knot of the Black jewelry Harry once lent her at her neck. Her expression is stubborn, saying she will not back down.

On the surface, Miriam's face conveys only irritation with how ill-bred the girl in front of her is. But there may be—under the surface—a hint of buried admiration and amused respect.

Possibly. If one searches.

*

Harry Black lies on his stomach, eyes closed, head flung to the side so that the picture-taker can see his profile. His hair is still as messy as ever, and not helped by the energetic activities he's just been fallen out of. His skin still holds a slight sheen of sweat. His hand curls around the edge of the pillow. He looks as if he were engaged with sleep, battling or wrestling with it. On the appropriate finger of his right hand, as always, rests the silver ring that Draco gave him as a present for their first joining ritual.

But perhaps, here, the camera should be put aside, and the photograph permitted not to exist. Some moments should be remembered, not recorded.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Four: A Toast to the Swift Years

Draco stepped back and eyed the chain on the wall, then nodded. Linked silver rings topped with blue-gray stones, in the colors of the old Malfoy crest, glinted and turned in small half-circles. The edges of their settings sealed together with clever hooks not visible from the ground, and the effect was of a familiar decoration turned strange by the array.

Draco turned, directing his gaze across the room. It was not, of course, the size of the great receiving hall at Malfoy Manor, but Harry had not wanted to hold this celebration in the place where Medusa and Eos Rosier-Henlin died, and Draco had agreed with him. So they had chosen another Malfoy house, one allowed to lapse into disrepair as the family grew smaller or lost money, and then cleaned it themselves with the aid of more household charms than Draco had known existed. This room, with Harry's magic to change the color of the walls and the tiles, had become a dark blue sanctuary with chains of silver rings along the walls, and a small and tasteful banner announcing the celebration of Draco's eighteenth birthday. It wouldn't hold everyone who might expect to be invited—all the newspaper reporters and a good number of Ministry officials, for example—but Draco would say he wanted this to remain a small, semi-private gathering. That would reduce the crowd *and* increase the smugness of those who managed to secure an invitation.

“Draco.”

His father’s voice could once have produced a stiffening in his back and a rushing sensation in his mind, as Draco thought of every argument they could have and ways to step around it. Now, he cocked his head and looked over his shoulder. “Father,” he said. “Have you come to wish me well?”

Lucius shook his head briskly and extended a box in his hands. “I wished to give you your gift in private,” he said.

Draco drew out his wand and cast several spells that would check for hexes, his eyes never leaving his father’s. Far from being offended, Lucius looked pleased. He would have been displeased if his son were so stupid as to trust him without thought.

Nothing showed up, and Draco took the box away from his father and hefted it. It was fairly small, whatever it was, and flat. A book? For a moment, Draco’s mind returned to Tom Riddle’s diary, which his father had ended up giving to Harry in second year, and he caught his breath.

Then he shook his head and slit the dark blue paper with a soft *Diffindo*, opening the box a moment later.

Inside, a flat plaque of pale metal, probably platinum, looked up at him. Seven lines of writing graced it, carved letters filled with silver. Draco reached down and traced the first with a finger, then looked at Lucius for an explanation.

“These are seven things I have thought of you over the years,” said Lucius, without preamble, “from the time you were eleven and in your first year at Hogwarts until now. Though you will finish your NEWTS out of school, this is still, technically, the last year you would have been at school, and when you left it, you would have been accounted an adult. This is a toast to the swift years, Draco, a record of things I have thought and no longer think, or may change my mind about in the future.” And then he turned and walked out of the room, as if he could not bear to share it with his son a moment longer.

Draco stared after him, then turned and read the seven lines. They went in chronological order, as he had suspected, with the first line of writing depicting his first year and the bottom line of writing his last one. No other interpretation made sense. Each was, at the most, a few sentences long.

Too bright, too curious, and too obsessed with the Potter boy. I should have released this butterfly from the Manor’s cocoon before this. He might at least have tested his wings against the wind, and if they tattered, I should have been there to rescue him from such mistakes as he will now make.

Even butterflies can dance.

Narcissa has told me about the unconscious effects of the Potter boy’s magic and how they might have compelled Draco to act unlike himself. I wish I could believe her, but I cannot. If Draco allows his mind to be bent that much, then the weakness is in himself.

The butterfly sheds his wings, and I see the beginnings of a falcon. I wish I could know when that egg might hatch and the whole bird come forth, so that I can see his shape. At the least he will have a powerful protector in the Potter boy, whom he has convinced to value him above all people in the world.

The falcon emerges, and is a stronger flyer than I thought him.

I tried to tame Draco on account of his weakness, only to have him strike back and expose the weaknesses in myself. That is unforgivable—on both of our parts.

My son has power, and strength, and might, and this falcon is more of Narcissa’s training than mine. She had the sense to set him free while I was still struggling with the jesses.

Draco closed his eyes and stood still for a moment. He wished he could go after his father and confront him about the lines, but he knew what would happen if he did. Lucius would stare at him coldly and deny that anything important had passed between them, and that might be the route to shut down the further intercourse with his father that was opening, slowly and cautiously, back up. Draco would have to live with the knowledge that his father had thought these things, and the reactions of anyone he wanted to show them to. But he could not discuss them with Lucius.

If Lucius Malfoy confessed his mistakes, he must do it in such a manner that it was impossible to hold the confessions over his head.

Abruptly, Draco strode out of the hall, and kept walking until he reached the front steps of the house. It was not far off sunrise, and the air had softened and warmed considerably from May. Early June, without a trace of snow. Draco sat down, put his arms on his knees, and buried his head in them.

My father sees me as all three.

It was the distinction he had once mentioned to Harry, the rarest distinction in Lucius Malfoy's lexicon. Draco had never dreamed that his father would apply it to him.

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

He wondered for a moment where Lucius thought he had forged the ability to keep living life at that level, and then shook his head, his hair brushing against his arms. That was another thing he would never know the answer to. Lucius would consider it a weakness to acknowledge that he'd written that last line, let alone acknowledge what it meant. Draco was sure he must have done the carving himself; he would have had to kill any craftsman who did it, not trusting to an *Obliviate*.

Draco knew he bore Harry's regard, which was a struggle enough to live up to. He had reckoned he'd long ago forfeited his father's, and now here it was, back again, tugging Narcissa's legacy in its train like a reminder.

He was—

He was more than he had thought, than many people thought him.

Draco knew he wasn't what many people would think of as moral. He didn't see why he should demonstrate loyalty, or consideration, or love, to most of the world. They had to prove that they were worthy of it, by intimidating him or demonstrating a constant attachment and regard to him while, at the same time, being worthy of affection and regard themselves. There were few people like that. Michael Rosier-Henlin had certainly not been one of them. Draco was not above doing things for political partners that would benefit him as well, but they were badly mistaken if they thought that implied that he *liked* them.

He was selfish, and he would use Dark spells that Harry would never consider, and he thought Harry's delicacy on matters political was almost too much to be borne. He was *not vates*, or anything like it. He was not the spoiled heir of the Malfoy line that he could have grown up to be, either, or Lucius's mindless puppet—the memory of the Imbolc ritual and the life he might have led without Harry pricked him then—but he was not the perfect, shining partner he knew many people thought should have stood at Harry's side.

He was someone who saw his own imperfections in the eyes of the world and could face them unflinchingly, pretending to correct them if it made sense to do so, but most of the time changing permanently only if they hurt someone he loved. And then he made the changes with speed and power. The rest of the time—well, Harry had once accused him of laziness, but Draco preferred to think of it as the law of conservation of effort. He didn't need to please those who disapproved of him so thoroughly they would never work with him, so why should he try?

Draco lifted his head, and gave a hard little smile that no one but him was there to see.

I like myself, and don't care if I'm likeable. I don't plan to change right now. I may change in the future. No one can predict it. Harry is the only one who can demand it, and even he can't dictate its course.

I'm what I want to be and what I need to be for this phase of my life.

Draco rose to his feet, carefully shrinking the plaque with a spell and tucking it into his robe pocket. He needed to meet Harry at Silver-Mirror to discuss the catering for the celebration, and was already a few minutes late. He liked the idea of showing up now and letting Harry fuss over and at him.

That's the way that I'm most different from my father, and even my mother. My mother planned for years in advance. My father makes plans on a smaller scale than that, but then he assumes that people will fall into place. I plan as I need to, in the moment and across years and in all the times in between. I can accept that change is necessary, and adapt to it when it comes.

If I'm not perfect now, I'll change until I am.

Draco lifted his head, challenging anyone who might watch him invisibly or from a distance in the way he moved, and Apparated home.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Five: Ave Atque Vale

“atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale” (And now forever, brother, hail and farewell).

Harry walked slowly along the shore.

Waves rushed up to his feet and lapped down again. They no longer looked silver, as they had in his madness, but merely gray. Harry halted and spent a moment staring east. On Midsummer Day, the sun would come up and stretch its rays over the waters, and for the first time in centuries, there would be no Potters to greet it, no possibility of such a greeting even if they simply chose not to come.

Harry sat down on the wet sand, ignoring the fact that it crusted his robes with heavy slime; that was what cleaning charms were for. He propped his knees up, looped his arms around them, leaned his chin on his right knee, and watched the sunrise. Now and then a flake of foam glinted from the spray, reminding him of unicorns, but no unicorns swam out of the morning to greet him. Harry would have refused the greeting if they had.

It was not unicorns he had come here to speak to.

“Parvati told me a bit about the wedding ritual,” he said, “what you told her. I remember the tadpoles. I remember that Lily trained me and made me hide the training from you, yes, but I also remember them.” He shut his eyes and sat with them shut, until the closing in his throat lessened and he was ready to continue.

“I loved you, and it was woven under the training, and would have existed without it. Lily couldn’t have built a regard into me that wasn’t already there. We were *twins*, Connor. You were always with me. I suppose other children learn to think of themselves as separate because there’s always a gap of experience between them; they know their siblings know things they don’t, or they can remember a time without their siblings, or they see their parents treat them differently. I can’t ask Draco, since he doesn’t have a brother. But I can’t remember a time without you, and the things that you didn’t know and I did—they weren’t that *important*, they were always in service to purity and innocence. So I learned to value your wisdom more than mine, while also being sure I had to know what I did to protect you, and that the separation was equally inevitable and irrelevant.

“The love might have been forced at first, but if it remained that way, it would have died at the end of third year with Sirius, when I finally let the scales drop from my eyes. Instead, we wound apart from each other for a long time, and then began a slow journey back towards each other again. You accepted your new position with strength and with grace, and strove not to be a burden on me.”

Harry opened his eyes, and watched the water washing to his feet. “No one else ever understood how *good* that was of you, I don’t think. Even I didn’t at the time, because I didn’t notice. And Snape and Draco think of it as—as redressing some sort of cosmic *balance*, as if, since I considered myself ordinary compared to you for twelve years, it was only right that you should think the same thing now.

“That’s *stupid*, Connor. There isn’t justice like that. If there were, Medusa Rosier-Henlin wouldn’t have been raped, and Narcissa Malfoy would have lived, and Regulus wouldn’t have endured years of suffering and lost his life at the end. What is that redress for? What crimes did they have to make up?” Harry shook his head wildly enough to send his hair whipping into his eyes. “No. I can’t accept that. There’s no one keeping a tally of all our actions and measuring out the grace we deserve and the punishment we merit. That’s why the justice and mercy *we* make are so important. They’re the only kind we can actually depend on.

“No. You were you, and you managed to transform yourself because you thought you had to. And you were something that none of the others were to me, because the others pushed me to be more human or thought of me as a savior or were convinced I could do better, be more, exist on a higher plane. You showed me all the grace ordinary human life has. You don’t *have* to be a Lord-level wizard to matter. The same surname isn’t the only way people connect. You don’t have to be a perfect specimen of maturity and adulthood for someone to take you seriously.

“There were things about you that drove me mad—the way you constantly bickered with Draco, for instance.” Harry closed his eyes, and sat until the memories of what Draco had told him about Voldemort’s burrow, the way the Light had come to take Connor’s soul away and what it showed him, had subsided into gentleness. Then he opened his eyes, and winced as the sun caught, glinting, on the edge of his glasses. “And without them, you wouldn’t have been my brother, and I wouldn’t have loved

you nearly as much.

“You looked into the future, and saw what you would be giving up, when you died. I can’t imagine it. To realize you could have everything you wanted, and lay your life down. Peter wanted to die because he thought he had nothing to lose, no one to miss him. Snape punishes himself for past sins. Draco wouldn’t have thought of giving his life up unless he saw no way for me to survive; then he might have deemed it worthwhile, to spare my suffering with his own. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I preferred your life to the suffering of everyone else, and refused to look closely at what I was doing.

“You saw *everything*, and knew what it would mean, and you still died.”

Harry reached down, picked up a handful of wet sand, and spent a moment shaping it into a tiny tower that rose from the beach. The next wave rolled in and destroyed it.

“I could say I’m not worthy of such a gift,” he said. “But that would still be hiding from what you did, whinging and punishing myself the way Snape does. I think he’s finally learned better, now, but he spent years hiding from the world and sneering at it because he assumed everyone would sneer at *him*. His son or not, that’s one trait of his I don’t want to inherit.

“Draco would think it only as much as he deserves, especially since he didn’t like you that much while you were alive. And—I love Draco, I do, but I’m not him, either. People don’t *owe* me anything. They can make the decision to give me gifts, but I don’t somehow deserve them by virtue of my existence.

“Your perspective is the one I want to adopt, Connor, because you saw everything and you sacrificed it because you thought I could still do more good than would happen if you were alive and I were dead. I want that vision. I want that future you saw. And the best way, right now, is for me to live and work towards it. If something changes, if I can make more of a difference by pulling back and not engaging as much, say, I hope I have the sense to see it.”

Harry pulled his glasses off. The rising sun had risen now, and its glory was all the world.

“I want to *see*. I want to know what is happening and what might happen, not just what happened and what will.” Harry smiled a bit. “I remember Lily saying once that the saddest words in English are ‘might have been.’ If that’s true, I think the gladdest words are ‘might’ and ‘may.’ You don’t know if your dearest wish is going to come true, but you can hope until it happens.”

He rose to his feet, put his glasses back on, and bowed his head, extending his hands to the sea. The sun rolled and glinted. The waves shone and sang.

“I’ll honor your sacrifice,” Harry said softly. “But I can’t let it define my life. I can’t mourn you forever. I can’t sink into permanent depression because you’re gone. I want to mingle your vision with my own, and let it become *part* of me, rather than the whole.

“The recovery will be long, but I don’t care how long it takes. It was for *this* you died, Connor, for the sake of a world where healing is still possible. For that, take my blessing, my thanks, my hail—“ Harry drew in a deep breath “—and my farewell. *Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.*”

The waves rolled in without answering. The sun shone. The beach sand beneath Harry’s feet crunched as he walked back towards his Apparition point.

It was a fair morning in June, and there was no need to hurry.

~*~*~*~*

Epilogue: In Memoriam

June 5th, 1999

Dear Blaise:

I’m a bit surprised to see you writing to me after so long, but beggars can’t be choosers, can they? And you need someone to tell you what’s happened in England, and whether it’s safe for you to return.

Disregard nothing of this letter, Blaise, neither the content nor the tone. Harry has doubtless forgotten that you betrayed him, since he’s had to live with so many and greater betrayals since then. I have not. When you return to England, tread softly, for you tread on my fangs.

Incidentally, as to the question that you included in your letter, I have no idea if the youngest Weasley is married, joined, engaged, single, or living with three monkeys and a hippocampus. Do you really think she matters to me?

Harry is asleep in bed behind me. Truly, truly asleep, without nightmares haunting him for once. He breathes deeply, which is why I can tell. Well, he should. We celebrated in many ways for my nineteenth birthday, including some that I'm certain you don't want to hear about.

Made it to nineteen, Blaise, in spite of the best efforts of you and many other people. This year has been mad. I once thought the largest part of our danger and excitement had passed with Voldemort, and, while I certainly couldn't predict what Harry and I would do from now on, we would be able to control it better when it happened.

I should learn not to make such statements where fate can hear me.

Harry just had to visit the Hebridean Black sanctuary and see the hatchlings the hybrid eggs from their British Red-Gold had produced, of course. I suspect you've heard about that. The Dragon-Keepers made sure every wizarding newspaper in Europe carried articles about it; "the blood of fire flowing in the world again" or something similar was how they titled it.

What you might not have heard was that Harry upset a dragon somehow—they don't know the vates so much as recognize him when they want to—and took a Hebridean Black's tail to the chest. I managed to hit him from the side and bear him down so that he missed some of the impact, but it happened anyway. He never came so close to dying, not even when he encountered a certain poison during the war with Voldemort. It was two weeks before he could walk again.

Harry being Harry, this did not disconcert him, and he refused to listen to my suggestions that the dragon be put down.

Then there was the journey to Africa and India, where we went to see about one of the magical species Harry's presence is loosening the webs on. I don't even want to mention it, Blaise. Don't talk to me about karkadanns and baobab trees.

We came back, and Harry happened to be in the Ministry on the day that assassins decided to go after Minister Apollonis. (I suppose you heard about the election, even in your little hiding place in France?) That's Harry's kind of luck. He can't be normal, and neither were the assassins; they had something with them like the Stone under the Ministry or the Potter Maze, an artifact from another world, and its specialty was undoing barriers of all kinds, including wards and Shield Charms. Including Harry's wards and Shield Charms. There was a lot of shouting, and a bit of possession, and some running around. An Order of Merlin, First Class, was appropriate for me when the day was done and the Minister still alive.

Did I mention that, Blaise? Cause trouble even just for me, not for Harry, and you're fighting someone whom half the British wizarding world considers a hero and is more than happy to aid. And that's not counting my political contacts, or the business ones that I've made by inventing new spells and selling them to the international community. They tell me that my new wards, modeled on house elf magic, will revolutionize security in the next few years. I don't care to know all the details all the time, of course. That's what the people I hire are for. But I know the money.

I've established some contacts of my own, for another business, in Peru. Lovely place, Peru. Of course, when the Dark Lady Elena Dead-eyes kidnapped me and put me in her labyrinth, I didn't think it was all that lovely, but I wasn't seeing that much of it. I couldn't maintain a prejudice against the country itself when Harry came after me, blinded Elena—he has a penchant for blinding Dark Ladies—rescued me, and found an abducted child named Clara whom the Potter estates apparently have decided is perfect for them and needs to be raised as the Potter magical and legal heir. So Peru is quite beautiful, and Elena was quite trounced, and Harry's life—he floos back and forth from Peru to give Clara lessons and to smooth out details with her birth family—is quite busy, and I am quite rich.

We've completed the joining rituals, as of little more than a month ago, on Walpurgis Night. I am fully Harry's now, and he is mine, joined partner in everyone's eyes. I'm sure you will be pleased to hear that the Ministers of Austria, France, Spain, and Portugal—the other countries in what they're calling the Hand of Wizardry—continue to find Harry pleasing and to work with him on wizard-Muggle relations. They're slowly infusing Muggle popular culture with the acceptance of magic where they can, and have commissioned Professor Snape to make potions that can enable Muggles to see magic and may be quietly distributed to interesting and willing subjects.

Tomorrow we go to Senegal. Reports of strange unicorns are rampant there, and Harry wants to investigate them, but he also wanted to wait until after my birthday.

And I will never send this letter, Blaise, because I find it says rather too much of things I don't want to show to anyone else after all. I would much prefer to sit back, and watch Harry sleep, and avoid thinking about Senegal until tomorrow. I'll write you

another letter, don't worry.

By all the fates that gave him to me, Harry is beautiful. I am only glad that he was good enough to deserve me.

Now to blow out the candles and join him.

*In conclusion,
Draco Lucius Black Malfoy.*

The End.