Freedom and Not Peace
By Lightening On the Wave
Summary: Sequel to Comes Out of Darkness Morn. Harry Potter’s life is split between duty and freely chosen responsibility, and as his dark dreams of Voldemort grow, it becomes a desperate balancing act.

But we, our master, we
Whose hearts, uplift to thee,
Ache with the pulse of thy remembered song,
We ask not nor await
From the clenched hands of fate,
As thou, remission of the world’s old wrong;
Respite we ask not, nor release;
Freedom a man may have, he shall not peace.
-Algernon Charles Swinburne, "To Victor Hugo."

~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter One: Lux Aeterna

“This is the holiest time,” James whispered. “This is the time of longest Light.”

Harry’s hands trembled as he clasped the little paper boat. He fought to still them. He reminded himself that he had chosen to come here, and that this ceremony was no different than the many pureblood rituals of the Dark wizards he had learned when he was a child.

But that was a lie, and Harry was getting better at realizing when he lied to himself. This was different. The pureblood rituals had never been something that he himself took part in during day-to-day life with his family. They had been exercises that he learned for the sake of winning his brother allies sometime in the future. This was a ritual of the Light, one that his own grandparents had celebrated, and his father as a child.

James looked almost like a child now, with his trousers rolled up above his ankles, as he took the first step forward into the gray waters of the North Sea, shivering at the waves’ chill touch. The water shone like stone, Harry thought. Even the foam curling in to the sweeping amber sand of the Northumberland beach looked sharp, as though it were made of broken glass.

“This is Midsummer morning.” James went on, his voice soft and solemn, “the moment when the sun shines in all its power, and magic can happen with its rising.” He placed the boat he himself held gently on the water.

The first wave to come towards it seemed set to swamp it. It was such a simple little thing, Harry thought, the sides made of folded parchment, the mast a twig that James had broken from one of Lux Aeterna’s yews, the sail a bit of brightly-colored cloth that had come from what James said was one of his childhood jumpers. James hadn’t even waved a wand or incanted a spell to protect it.

But, inexplicably, the wave shied away from the boat and swept around it instead of over it. The next one went under it, and bore it up. Harry caught his breath. He couldn’t feel the surge of magic that he would have expected, even the oddly directionless force that he associated with wandless magic, but there was something there, a faint golden glow that limned the boat. It grew brighter as Harry watched, and then the boat began to blaze like the sun. James let out a shaky breath. Harry darted a glance at his father. He was smiling.

“We sail our ships,” he whispered, “to welcome in the sun, to salute it, as we once sailed out of the sun on a Midsummer morning.”

Harry glanced at Connor, and found that his twin’s eyes were wide. Connor obviously didn’t know what to think, either. Harry flashed him a small smile, and then waded forward into the water and released his own boat.

The sunlight curled around it, and sent it skidding forward, away from the shore, following the path of James’s boat. Harry watched as it bobbed and skipped. He could feel the magic reaching out to him this time, a purring warmth that slipped into his bones and took up residence there, as if his stomach had turned into its own cat.

Connor’s boat followed his, nodding its mast like a head as it slid after the other two. Harry watched them until a shining
gray wave took the three shimmering craft from sight. He was barely aware that his father had reached out and taken hold of his hand until he felt James tug gently at him, urging them both back to shore.

Harry walked as if in a daze. He could feel the sunlight traveling with him, lingering, exploring his bones with leisurely fingers. He had never been conscious of how bright everything in the world was. When he turned his head, individual grains of sand flashed as if polished. The birds darting overhead were too brilliant to look at. Harry exhaled a little breath and put out a hand.

He would have sworn that a great warm tongue licked his palm before it vanished.

James looked faintly uneasy as they reached shore again, but nodded bracingly when Harry glanced at him. “The sun is welcoming you, that’s all,” he said. “Potters have performed this ritual for hundreds of years. This is just the summer and the sun and the light getting a good look at you.”

“It tickles!” Connor complained abruptly, and Harry saw that his eyes, for once, weren’t dulled with nightmares of Sirius’s death or Voldemort’s capture and torture of him. He was grabbing at his jumper, laughing and swatting, as if insects were biting him. “I’ve never felt the sun tickle me before!”

“You’ve never been here before,” said James, his pensive frown passing away, “on this day, at this time.” He grabbed Connor and ruffled his hair. “Dawn on Midsummer is special, like sunset. Aren’t you glad I dragged you out of bed?”

“Not if it was just to tickle me!” Connor squirmed out of his father’s grasp, and laughed again. “I didn’t know that this would involve making everything so bright I couldn’t see, and tickling!”

Harry sighed quietly in relief. He had been doing what he could to heal his brother, to quell his trauma, to make him see that there was life even after everything he had been through, but he hadn’t achieved a result this dramatic. Harry thought the wind and the light had as much to do with that as his father did, though.

He glanced around again. The land around them was thick with birds and spray and the noticeable wind and light, but empty of people. The beach curved down to meet the sea like an extended hand. The sea roared in to meet it meanwhile, flinging its waves a good distance up the sand before trickling away between its fingers. The noise was constant, smooth, reassuring, steady as a heartbeat. Harry found himself comforted to think that he could die, and still the sea would go on washing up on the sand.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up, blinking. Connor had run ahead towards the Portkey that would take them back to Lux Aeterna, but James was walking at his side, peering closely at his face.

“Didn’t you enjoy the ritual?” he asked.

Harry smiled. “Of course I did. It was wonderful to meet Light magic, in a way I haven’t before. I didn’t know that dances of any kind survived among the Light wizards. I’m glad they do.”

“You looked so…” James fumbled for a word. Harry waited patiently. They were new at this, all of them. It would do no good if he hurried his father along, through the very pause that might be part of the reason James was learning to trust him. “So intent,” his father said at last.

“I was thinking of Connor,” said Harry. “He’s much happier now than he was when we left the school.”

James stopped, fidgeting from foot to foot. Harry stopped, too, gazing into his face. He was somewhat startled to find that he didn’t have to crane his head back as far as he remembered. Of course, part of that came from not being around James for months at a time, but part of it was probably the growth spurt that James insisted he was finally entering.

“You know,” said James at last, every word a step on an eggshell, “that you can think of yourself, too? You can talk to me about anything that’s bothering you? I’ll help take care of Connor, Harry. I know you can’t stop completely. But I want you to have the chance to be taken care of, too.” He stared off into the distance. Harry wondered if he was watching Connor. He hoped so. Death Eaters were unlikely to attack here, but they were still outside Lux Aeterna’s wards, and accidents could happen. “Especially since Snape can’t visit you.”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I knew that might happen.” Lux Aeterna’s wards would accept Draco, who
hadn’t practiced enough Dark magic to make a difference to them, but a combination of Snape’s Dark Mark, his magic, and James’s dislike for him had made the Potter linchpin reject the Potions Master. Harry had promised to meet him at some point during the summer before they went back to Hogwarts, but right now he was still struggling to fit back with his family and learn new ways of being comfortable around them. And Connor still had at least one nightmare every night. Harry didn’t think he could leave.

“You don’t sound upset,” James ventured, and finally met his eyes again. Harry was glad. It was easier to reassure people that he really was fine when they did that.

“I’m not,” said Harry, with a shrug. “Like I said, I knew that might happen.”

James was silent. He simply looked at Harry, and Harry let him look. His father understood him better after those silent, locked gazes.

“Are you going to let Hedwig fly from here?” James asked when he’d apparently done his fill of looking.

Harry started, and then flushed. In truth, with the ritual and then his worry over Connor, he’d nearly forgotten that he’d brought his owl along, and why. “Yes,” he murmured, and then hurried over to where the snowy owl waited, preening her feathers on a boulder and looking at the seabirds as though to say that she could out fly them all.

She perked up when Harry pulled a parchment from his pocket and bound it carefully to her leg. He spent a moment stroking her feathers, gazing into her golden eyes. Unlike the looks he shared with his father, his brother, and sometimes, it seemed, everyone else, this was an uncomplicated one.


Hedwig hooted her understanding, and clambered onto his arm as Harry extended it. Harry winced at the prickle of her claws, but spun and launched her into the air, the way that one should launch an owl at this point in the truce-dance.

Dazzling light spread around Hedwig as her wings caught the wind, her feathers glinting like the foam. Harry watched her as she turned south, towards Wiltshire, her pace precise and swift. She was out of sight in seconds.

Harry sighed, hoping the circle of light was a good omen. He had chosen his truce-gift carefully. It was the only one in the dance that he would initiate, given that Lucius had started this out by courting him. He had chosen to send a list of his own dearest ambitions and hopes, and what he perceived as his duties.

He wanted Lucius to understand what he would and would not do.

Draco would no doubt flush at the news. Snape would no doubt rail that he had been stupid. Even Narcissa Malfoy might raise an eyebrow. Harry was well-aware that she loved her husband, but did not entirely trust him.

Harry hoped that Lucius would respond with a similar list.

It’s no good hating and distrusting people until they’ve proven beyond all doubt that they can be hated and distrusted, he thought as he accompanied his father back to the Portkey. If I’d done that in the past, I would have rejected Draco just based on his being a Malfoy, and Hawthorn and Adalrico just based on their once being Death Eaters, and I would have lost the chance to reconcile with my father and brother. It’s better to ask, if you can, and see what they tell you.

******

Harry hesitated, one hand on the door handle. After all, James hadn’t forbidden him to enter this room. He’d just said that it might not be a good idea.

And Connor was peacefully asleep now, his nightmares calmed by a Dreamless Sleep potion, and James was at least dozing, if not outright asleep, and Remus was still recovering from the full moon. And Harry was sick of dreaming of dark forests and a cold, high-pitched voice murmuring constantly of the sun. And his scar didn’t usually bleed when he was awake.

Besides, he’d explored the rest of Lux Aeterna and found fascinating things—mirrors that only reflected pureblood wizards, windows that gazed into different worlds, rooms so perfectly proportioned that the light flooding them formed constructs like cathedrals with walls of sun and air. Nothing had harmed him. Harry couldn’t see that this would be much different.
He did blink as a pulse of warmth hit him, but the door yielded when he pushed it, and nothing sprang out at him as he crossed the threshold.

Beyond the threshold, a wave of magic stopped him where he stood. Harry had never felt anything like it. He gazed at the structure in front of him, and understood why. No wizard, Light or Dark, had made this thing. It had come from...somewhere else.

The Maze was a glittering, overlapping labyrinth of tunnels, though Harry found it extremely hard to tell where one ended and another began, the same way that he found it hard to distinguish the ending of one sleeve when his jumper was sprawled on the floor. Light made it even harder to pick them out, wavering over the edges and the curves like a heat shimmer. Harry couldn’t tell its color. Was it white, or silver, or gold, or something else? Perhaps it was the blue-white hue at the hearts of diamonds. Harry couldn’t see the end of the Maze, but he could tell it filled almost the whole of the enormous room.

This was the structure his father had entered to face his mistakes, to learn what needed to be done for his family and his friends.

Harry felt the heat on his face, and could understand the why of that, too. This was Light as honest as a blade. Touch it, and it would cut you, but it would sear away all the impurities, too, and cut away the bruised and bleeding flesh. What was left would be scoured clean.

Harry didn’t enter it. He wasn’t that great a fool. But he walked carefully around the edge of the burning wards, and studied the Maze.

A few moments later, as the heat and the light focused and sharpened, he became aware that it was watching him back.

Harry blinked, and lifted his chin. So far, everything he had met in Lux Aeterna had not attacked him for the Dark magic that he had used in the past; his Potter blood had protected him. He was becoming aware that this might be the exception. He had imagined the Maze, but this was beyond his imagining. Just being in the same room with the Maze made him feel as if he were about to burst into a phoenix’s cleansing flames.

A trill sounded above him, and Harry felt the Maze’s attention shift, then relax. After all, the bird that had just entered the room was a creature of light. Fawkes, Dumbledore’s phoenix who for some reason had abandoned the Headmaster and come with Harry, settled on his shoulder and rubbed his head against Harry’s cheek.

Harry yawned. Sleep hadn’t sounded at all appealing just a moment ago, and now it did. He cast a suspicious glance at Fawkes. Fawkes blinked one dark eye and sang a song of heat that blended into the warm rustle of blankets and the pleasant drowse of half-wakefulness at the end.

Harry yawned again. “I don’t want to go to bed,” he muttered, but he was being childish and he knew it.

Fawkes crooned, and Harry’s eyes almost fell shut. He shook his head slowly. “I might wake Connor up if I went back now…”

The Maze abruptly reached out to him.

Harry froze, his heart banging hard and chasing away the spell of sleep Fawkes had tried to weave. Harry felt the light move over him, piercing, flickering, a few steps away from flame. Fawkes sat silent but respectful under it. Harry found himself remembering every time he had used Dark magic, every time he had hurt someone else even by accident, and especially the Walpurgis Night celebration, where he had danced wildly among the Dark wizards and gone through a portal of blackness that was supposed to free him utterly.

The Light let him go. Harry blinked and pushed his glasses up his nose. The Maze was still watching him, but now it was an indulgent kind of watchfulness, the kind a mother might give to a favored child.

Harry winced, and wished that comparison had not occurred to him.

Behind him, the door opened. The burning wards around the Maze slowly expanded, herding him towards it. Harry sighed and went.

“I’ll just come back, you know,” he told the Maze.
The barely discernible hum in his head had a tone of amusement to it this time.
Harry huffed and went to bed. He hated it when people—well, that included magical objects—treated him like a child. But he supposed that if anything could get away with it, an enormously powerful magical artifact not originally of Earth could.

This time, he didn’t go to bed alone. Fawkes came along, the glow of his feathers muted when Harry hissed at him that he might wake Connor up, and perched on his pillow, and sang. Harry tried to resist, but his eyes fell shut, and he drifted away into a sleep that was dreamless, if one didn’t count the image of himself walking along a path of white thorns and glass roses, trying to find the one trail that would lead to freedom for everybody.

Phoenix song accompanied him all the way.

******

James’s hands trembled as he unfolded the parchment. He didn’t mind admitting it. Of course, it also helped that he was alone in his study, and there was no one else to see his hands shaking. This was a response to the letter he had written Peter the day after he brought his boys home to Lux Aeterna.

Peter hadn’t responded for nearly four weeks; this was the last day of June. James had been shamefully relieved. If his betrayed friend wanted to cut all the ties between them, that would be easier.

But he hadn’t, as evidenced by this letter.

James took a deep breath, lowered his eyes to the parchment, and read.

Dear James:

I don’t even know if I should call you that, since for the last twelve years you have been anything but dear to me.

James closed his eyes for a moment. If he listened to the boys playing with their friends beyond the window of his study, which looked out over Lux Aeterna’s glittering sweep of front lawn, then he could pretend that Peter’s letter was not there, and all the words that he deserved were not smacking him in the face.

You deserve them, he reminded himself, in a firm tone of voice that he thought he’d picked up from the Maze, and then looked back at the letter.

And yet that is not true, since, after all, I did go to Azkaban for your sake, and Sirius’s, and Remus’s. For twelve years, I stayed there for you. I told myself that you loved me, that you’d just been frightened, that you hadn’t meant to betray me.

But you did. It hurt, James, even knowing that when it came down to a choice between me and your own family, of course you’d choose your own family. You chose Sirius and Remus over me too, though, and that hurt.

James found it hard to breathe. But it was better, it had to be better, than the pain he’d felt when he realized he’d been hiding from the truth all these years.

I decided at last that I didn’t have any reason to stay in Azkaban any longer, no reason to honor a covenant with obviously false friends. I broke my phoenix web’s grip by shifting it to another target, and focused on Harry. I promised myself that I’d protect him and keep him from being a sacrifice like I have been.

Dumbledore was wrong, James. Innocence isn’t innocence when it’s ignorance. Just to keep the whole wizarding world innocent of war, Dumbledore sacrificed minds and imbued them with a terrible knowledge. At least he had my consent when he did it to me. He never got Harry’s.

That’s what I’m going to ask for, James, as proof that you’re telling the truth. Be a good father to Harry. If I hear that he suffered in your care, and you could have prevented the suffering, or you caused it, then I will consider you an enemy from now until the end of my life. I will slip in through any hole in your defenses that you can find. A rat can cause plenty of trouble before he’s caught, James, and even a wizard is defenseless when he comes with enough friends. I know that very well.

If you can reassure me that you’re going to be a good father to Harry, contact me again. If you don’t write back, I’ll assume you’re the enemy.
James carefully put the parchment down and sat back, staring at the ceiling. On the whole, it hadn’t been that bad, he thought, aware of the numbness at the center of himself. He could do what Peter had suggested. He would write back. He certainly intended to be a good father to Harry. And, in a way, it was good that he had this threat at his back, so he wouldn’t ever be tempted to slip and falter.

He just hadn’t expected a letter like this from Peter. There had been bitterness in it, yes, but also a savage strength that James had never seen when they were students in Hogwarts together. Twelve years in Azkaban had changed him.

Or it was always there, and I just never took the care to see it.

And now he had the visual of gray rats swarming him in his head. He knew that Peter had a special connection with rats, could summon them and speak with them. He could certainly call enough to take down someone else, and from the tone in his words, he wouldn’t hesitate.

James stood up and wandered to the window, looking out over the vast lawn.

Ron Weasley and Connor were swooping about on their brooms, chasing the Quaffle that hovered and darted in front of them. Their laughter was audible from here. James hadn’t minded at all when they asked him to transfigure the lawn into a Quidditch pitch. It was simple magic, if strong, and it kept Connor satisfied. Connor needed time and healing, still, but his wants, as opposed to his needs, were fairly easy to tend to.

Harry…was a different matter.

James had to look around the lawn a few times before he could spot his elder son. Harry sat with Draco Malfoy in the shade of one of the yews at the edge of the grass. He was speaking with him, far too quietly to be heard from here. James narrowed his eyes. They didn’t appear to be playing a game.

His gaze flitted back and forth from the flying pair to the sitting pair, and he shook his head.

He supposed he could dismiss the differences between the two friendships as products of the differences between his sons, or the boys they had befriended, or Light and Dark pureblooded wizards, or Gryffindors and Slytherins. But he still didn’t know if that would produce so profound a gap. Connor and Ron were much the way he remembered himself and Sirius being—loud, strong as sunlight, boisterous as young lions, interested in Quidditch more than pranks but otherwise comparable.

Harry and Draco were so much quieter that it was unnerving. They did fly and play Quidditch together, and practice dueling spells together, and explore Lux Aeterna and commented on the artifacts together. (James had had to warn them away from several, including his great-grandfather’s portrait, which had tried to hex Draco on learning he was a Malfoy). But they did it with an incredible intensity, as though each moment would never come again, and Draco, at least, gave James a poisonous glare whenever they were interrupted, quite unlike the usual sulky protest of a child told he had to go home now. Harry would become more reserved instantly when he noticed his father watching them, but if he didn’t notice, he smiled and laughed in a way that James had never seen or heard when Harry lived with them in Godric’s Hollow.

James couldn’t understand it, and that agitated him, because he thought it meant he couldn’t understand his son.

The door of the study opened, and James turned and smiled at Remus. “Feeling better?” he asked.

Remus nodded and covered his mouth with one hand to hide a yawn. “Don’t know what came over me,” he said. “Stress, I suppose, or the combination of it and the Wolfsbane Potion.”

James nodded. Remus had been unable to attend the Midsummer morning ritual with them because of the full moon, but even after it had passed, he had been more tired than usual, and spent long hours sleeping or wandering quietly by himself in the corners of Lux Aeterna. James didn’t know—

Oh. Of course I do.

James winced. “Remus,” he said quietly, “you do know that you can talk to me about Sirius.”

Remus blinked at him.
“I’ve been remiss not to talk to you about it before this,” said James.

“I didn’t want to intrude,” said Remus, turning to admire a portrait on the wall, though his tense shoulders said he wasn’t admiring it at all. “I—you’ve been so busy with your boys, James, and Merlin knows they need every bit of attention that you can give them—“

“I still should have talked to you,” said James. “I’m an idiot, Remus.” He moved carefully up to stand beside his friend, and wasn’t surprised that the woman in the portrait, his great-aunt Mafalda, bore a strong resemblance to Sirius. The pureblood families had intermarried many times in the past, and there had been a time when the Blacks were considered prestigious allies, without the taint of insanity and Dark magic that had overcome the past few generations. Mafalda was peering hard at Remus now, as though trying to decide what to say to cheer him up. James knew how she felt. “You miss him, don’t you?”

“Every damn day,” said Remus softly. “He was—I’m still so angry at him, for not just telling us, the imbecile, that he had the Dark Lord in his head, and then I hate myself for being angry at him, and then I remember the pranks he used to pull and want to laugh, and then I’m angry at him again for making me feel so many contradictory emotions, and then I remember the way he died and want to scream.” He lowered his head, his breathing careful and paced. James recognized the patterns. Remus had learned them while he was still a child, to control the wolf who thought his pain a grand game.

“I know,” James whispered. In truth, he didn’t feel much better, but he had simply been letting his grief for Sirius overwhelm him when he was alone at night, and sure that Connor and Harry didn’t need anything from him right then. He hesitated for a long moment, then told himself, Looking stupid be damned, and pulled Remus into a rough hug. “I miss him every damn day, too. And the way he died is infuriating. The next time I see him, I’m going to kick his arse.”

Remus laughed hard for a moment, and then tears spilled into his voice, though he didn’t let them fall. James moved him over until they sat in front of the window, and positioned himself between Remus and the door.

“No.” Harry’s voice was endlessly patient, Draco thought, even in a situation like this, where the person he was being patient at didn’t deserve the favor. “You didn’t flick your wrist hard enough. Like this. Protego!”

The Shield Charm snapped up in front of Harry. Draco backed away a step, though in truth that still left him close to Harry. The spell was instant, effective, and very, very strong. The wild crackle of magic made Draco’s hair stand on end, and seemed to bounce from point to point in the wide room, constantly illuminated by crossing beams of sunlight from the enormous windows, that James had given the boys to practice in.

Draco didn’t mind. That power smelled like roses, where once it had pained him. He loved to watch Harry practicing magic, even when, as now, he had to use his wand so that someone else could imitate him.

He just wished that Harry didn’t have to be teaching his brother.

Connor Potter stood on the other side of the room, watching Harry with a frown of concentration. He held his wand out in front of him and said, without much conviction, “Protego.”

The wrist flick was still wrong, Draco saw in exasperation, and the Shield Charm failed to materialize. Connor scowled. “I’ll never be able to do it,” he declared.

“Of course you will.” Harry gave his brother a smile that made Draco feel sick. Harry was very far from the blind idiot he’d been where Connor was concerned a year ago, but he still had too much of himself tied up in the prat, Draco thought. He should pay more attention to those who were really concerned with him, like Draco, and should certainly not calmly insist on practicing with his brother when Draco was there, just because it was part of his daily routine.

“Do you really think so?” Connor glanced up, searching out Harry’s eyes for reassurance. Draco scowled and folded his arms. Connor had just turned from asking Sirius for protection to asking Harry. And Harry gave it, and gave it—poured more and more of himself down the endless dry well that was Connor Potter. Draco had to struggle to retain his composed mask when he thought of it.
“Of course I do,” said Harry, his voice low and soothing. “A powerful wizard is nothing without will, Connor. He can practice and practice, and not rouse the tiniest spark from his wand if he doesn’t really want to. Or he can cast the most dazzling spells, and none of them will be what he really intends, because he doesn’t know what he really intends. You’re faltering now because of a lack of will, but you don’t have to. You know what’s at stake. You know that we have to do this.”

Connor shivered, then raised his head and nodded. Draco blinked. This wasn’t the first time Harry had said something like that, but it was the first time the words had worked so complete a transformation.

“I remember the Shrieking Shack,” Connor whispered.

That was another thing that drove Draco mad. Harry had told him what happened in the Shack, but it wasn’t the same as having been there. That was obvious every time the twins traded glances. They shared some special depth of experience that Draco didn’t. Connor had access to part of Harry that he didn’t.

Harry glanced back at him abruptly. “Are you all right, Draco?”

Draco blinked, realizing he’d almost let his own magic get out of control, and shook his head. “Fine.”

Harry studied him for a moment more, then nodded and turned back to Connor. “Like this,” he said, voice strong and confident. “Protego!”

Connor echoed him, his voice as self-willed, and this time gave the right wrist flick

A thin shield encased him. Harry laughed aloud. “Excellent, Connor! You’ll have to work on making it stronger, still, but you’ve got the will, now, and you know what you need to do. I think even this shield will stand up to hexes.” He gestured carefully with his wand. Draco knew Harry had to hold himself back as if on chains in situations like this. He was so much more used to using wandless, raw, wild magic. “Petrificus Totalus!”

The hex shot towards Connor and bounced off his shield. Connor’s smile widened, and he broke into a spontaneous jig. Harry laughed again.

“Now that you can do it, we’ll start working on building the shield stronger,” he promised his brother, “and other defensive spells.”


Harry nodded. “I’ll let you go—for today,” he said, in a mock threatening tone, and Connor laughed in turn. “It must be near dinner, anyway. But we’ll work on this tomorrow, and every day until you can do it perfectly.”

Connor nodded. “I know,” he said, and bounced off and through the door.

Harry turned to Draco the moment he was gone. “He is getting better,” he said.

Draco lifted his chin. “You don’t know that I was about to say anything about that.”

“Yes,” Harry pointed out, “I do.”

Draco sighed. “Fine, Harry. But I want to know—when are you going to tell him that you’re holding back on him?”

Harry’s eyes slid away from his. Draco grasped his chin and tilted his face back, the way he had in the hospital wing when Harry had tried to deny that Draco loved him.

“You are,” said Draco gently. If he played his cards right, he might be able to win Harry free of his commitment to teaching his brother. Surely James Potter could do it. He should. Connor was his child. “You’re too powerful for these kinds of games. You know it. You can demonstrate to him how to cast spells, but you don’t make a good opponent for a duel. You could destroy him at any time, and block any spell he casts, and you don’t want to hurt him anyway. He’ll only improve to a certain point, and then he’ll start thinking that he’s much better-prepared than he really is. Get someone else to train him. Your father, maybe, or Professor Lupin. They’re nearer his match in power.”

“I said that I would teach him,” Harry whispered. “I said that even at Hogwarts, and it didn’t work very well there. I need to
make up for that. And there’s still plenty of things I can teach him that don’t rely on magic. Pureblood rituals, history, etiquette, leadership…"

“Harry.” Draco decided that he might as well give Harry the full message that his parents had communicated to him before he left the Manor to visit Lux Aeterna. He hadn’t wanted to, thinking the words too harsh for Harry’s current worldview, but Harry needed to hear them. “You can teach him those things, yes, but he doesn’t need them nearly as much as the magic. If Voldemort comes back and Connor’s the one to defeat him, fine.” Draco couldn’t keep the skepticism out of his voice. He truly didn’t think that the Dark Lord was going to fall at Connor’s hand, ambiguous prophecy or not. Harry was so much his brother’s better that it was impossible to conceive of. “But that doesn’t mean he’s going to be a leader. You are. You have to be. You know that there are wizards keeping an eye on you for your power, and they’ll be looking for signs of your true intentions soon. That’s what my mother was doing as Starborn, making sure that there are some wizards cautiously sympathetic to the possibility of a third side, not Voldemort’s or Dumbledore’s. She can only do that because you’re—well, you. And sooner or later, you’ll have to become the leader of that third side. My parents are willing to follow you if you become that leader, you know.”

That last fact had impressed Draco the most. He didn’t know what Midsummer gift Harry had sent to his father, but he did know that Lucius had been stunned and shaken for a day afterward, and then gravely thoughtful. And his mother, his mother who had never bowed her head to Voldemort, never got her arm branded with the Dark Mark, had smiled when Draco asked her about Harry and said, “He won’t be a Lord, dear. He will be something much greater than that. And he shall have my loyalty until the day he shows that he can’t become that person anymore. I don’t expect that day to come.”

“I don’t want to give anyone orders.”

Draco blinked, and came back from his dreams of the future to find the Harry of the now facing him, his arms folded and his eyes hard and his face shut.

“I don’t want to compel anyone,” said Harry. “And I don’t want to order anyone around, either. If I can ask them to do things, fine. But I won’t command them, Draco. I won’t.”

“You’re not going to be a Lord,” Draco tried.

“I don’t care.” Harry stepped away from him, and Draco was almost instantly irritated, as he always was when Harry got so far away from him. He tried to calm down, not let it show in his face. “They would still expect me to tell them what to do, wouldn’t they?”

Reluctantly, Draco nodded. His mother had made that point to him. She had done what she had done so far to make the world a safer place for her son and to fulfill a debt she owed to Harry, but sooner or later she would come to a place where only Harry’s power, backed by wisdom, could safely guide her. She would look to him then, and whatever name Harry gave what he told her, advice or commands or something else, she would still be obeying.

“I don’t want to,” said Harry. “I’ve been a slave. I would never wish that fate on anyone else.”

“If they choose it, they’re not slaves,” said Draco. “Merlin, you’re frustrating.”

Harry shook his head. “I prefer to make bargains and debts and sacrifices, Draco. I understand those. As long as I can be of use to your family, as long as I can give something in return for any aid I get, then I’m happy enough. But don’t ask me to become some kind of—” He waved his hands, obviously searching for the right word. “General,” he spat at last, and strode towards the door.

“Harry,” Draco whispered.

Harry heard it, and stopped, though he didn’t look at him.

“There might be times when the bargains have to be very general, or you can’t reach someone to ask their opinion,” said Draco. “You’ve studied war. You know that. Are you really going to refuse to lead just because you might hurt someone’s feelings, or make them feel briefly like a slave?”

Harry looked back over his shoulder. “I told you about being vates.”

Draco nodded, bewildered.
“I don’t see how I could be both the kind of leader that your parents want me to be and vates,” said Harry. “Not when one is about commanding, sometimes without thought, and the other is about knowing myself so deeply that I’ll be instantly aware of when I’m giving a command, and hammered by disgust for doing it. The magical creatures have been hurt enough by their bindings, Draco. I can’t let myself get used to putting bindings on wizards. I’ll rely on the pureblood rituals, which someone won’t use unless they have full knowledge of what it entails, and bargains. If I can’t return aid for aid, equal help for equal help, then I won’t make the bargain.”

Draco paused. What he had to say next sounded foolish and naïve, but he needed to say it.

“I think you can be both, Harry,” he said. “If anyone can, it’s you.”

Harry blinked, obviously startled, then gave him a wry grin. “It’s nice that you have such faith in me, Draco, but I think I’ll probably have to choose, and I choose to be vates. I’ll leave free choice open to the wizards, too, though they don’t need as many nets removed. Just the nets that make them so blind and stubborn,” he added, in an undertone.

“But what if someone chooses to obey you?” Draco asked. “Would you really deny that decision and force your own will over that person’s will?”

He hated the way the question made Harry’s smile vanish, but they needed to consider this. **Harry** needed to consider this, at least. Draco watched him struggle with discomfort squirming in his gut. He wished he could hug Harry and say he understood, but he didn’t. He knew where he stood, where he would always stand.

Harry was the one who needed to make the choice.

“I don’t know,” said Harry at last, in a subdued tone. “I guess not.”

Draco knew when to back off. The scent of roses in the room was nearly overpowering, as Harry’s magic reacted to his upset. He smiled. It wasn’t hard to do, now that the prat was gone. “Well, you don’t need to choose right now. Do you want to go back and explore that secret passage in the attic?”

Harry perked up immediately. “Yes!” He opened the door that led out of the room and glanced around a few times. “But we’ll have to be careful,” he whispered. “Dad told me there was a ward on that door for a reason.”

Draco blinked. He didn’t remember a ward. “What ward?”

Harry swallowed. “I, uh, kind of destroyed it because it wouldn’t let us in,” he admitted. “But I’m sure that there’s nothing there that will hurt us.”

“Of course not,” Draco said, reminding himself to be on guard, just in case.

Harry gave him a wild smile and dashed out of the room, heading for the attic—quietly.

*Everything is so hard,* Draco complained to himself, as he followed Harry through the sunlight of Lux Aeterna. *I wish it wasn’t this hard. But at least I’m here, and I can make sure that he doesn’t overtax himself, or ignore important decisions, or make stupid ones. And that’s enough.*

*And if it’s not enough, I’ll make it be enough.*

---

**Interlude: A Flurry of Letters**

**June 30th, 1994**

**Dear Peter:**

I assure you that I intend to take good care of Harry. I don’t know if you want me to swear an oath, since the last ones I swore were hardly kept. But I will, if you wish me to. Simply name the terms: by Merlin, by magic, or anything else.

Harry is healing, I think. He’s thrown himself into teaching his brother. I’ve tried to get him to slow down and relax when I think he needs it. He doesn’t take to that very well. The more I watch him, the more I realize my son has never had a true
parent. In some ways, he’s learned to compensate on his own. In others, he hasn’t, or he’s missing the presence of his

guardian. His dislike of ‘restrictions’ such as eating properly and going to bed early makes me think that he’s still not learned
to care for himself.

I’ve asked Harry what he wants. That sometimes does me good, but not often. What Harry says he wants is time with his

brother, and honesty from me, and for Draco Malfoy to visit him. Nothing else.

If you have any advice that you can give me, Peter, I’d be grateful. You saw more of him this year than I did. And it’s not

just your threat driving me, before you make that insinuation. I really do want to be a better father to my sons. Nothing else is
more important to me right now.

James.

*******

July 1st, 1994

Lily:

I don’t really know what to say to you, so I’ll put my words on the parchment and hope that you can make them out. You

always used to be good at that, back at Hogwarts. I’m wondering how much of the woman I knew after Hogwarts was real

and how much an illusion, so I’ll go back to what I knew was true.

Do you want to see our sons again for any other purpose than using them in the war? That’s the question I need an answer to

before I can let you see Connor again. The other decision isn’t yours, but Harry’s.

I’ve asked Connor. He went big-eyed and quiet, and then admitted that he misses you, but he’s afraid of what would happen

if he saw you again- if you would try to control him or tell him that he couldn’t have his own life or see Harry again until

Harry was properly under control.

Maybe that’s the second question I want an answer to. If you do want to see our sons again for any other purpose than just

making them sacrifices, then what would you say to them? You can write it out. I can’t promise to show it to them.

And yes, before you can ask, I love you still. That doesn’t mean I can bring the boys back to you yet. I can’t.

James.

*******

July 1st, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I hope you’re well, sir. I’ve investigated the possibilities of your coming through to Lux Aeterna by floo and Portkey, and

I’m afraid that the wards block them both. Lux Aeterna is entirely sealed off to the world for some people, and entirely open
to others. James says that he can’t lower one set of wards, and he certainly can’t change his dislike of you when he doesn’t
know you very well at all.

Could you perhaps write to him, sir? That might help ease the lowering of the barriers, and permit you to come to Lux

Aeterna in time.

I’m very well. Connor is improving in leaps and bounds. Lux Aeterna is fascinating—not as fascinating as Dark magic or

Potions, of course, but it has many treasures, and hidden corners I didn’t know existed. I’ve met my grandparents and great-

aunts and other relatives through portraits. I’ve learned that the Maze James was in compelled him to honesty, so I trust his
intentions more now. I’ve celebrated Midsummer by launching boats into the dawn from a beach in Northumberland. I’m
slowly starting to feel at home here. It isn’t a feeling I’ve felt very often before, so it took me some time to analyze it. Of

course, Draco claims that I felt at home at Malfoy Manor, but I don’t know. I was so tense the first time I was there, for

Christmas, and then I was largely broken last summer, and the people around me were more important than the place.

Please don’t tell Draco I said that, sir.
I’ve read the books you sent me, and I had a few questions. Is it really true that Calming Potions can’t be improved? Why? The book just made a flat statement about it, which I don’t think very wise. It seems as though the addition of a few violet petals should not only make them last longer, but also taste better. And I was thinking that perhaps a few more violet petals in the Wolfsbane Potion wouldn’t go amiss, either.

I was wondering whether I couldn’t make a potion that would mimic the effects of the Disillusionment Charm. Oh, I know that I’m very far from being able to make a successful potion of my own, but the theory is sound, I think, sir. Can you take a look at my list of notes on this other parchment and tell me what I should do to brew it?

Why are Beetle’s Eye Potions orange?

I promise, sir, that I will arrange to visit you before we come back to Hogwarts. Perhaps at Diagon Alley?

Harry.

******

July 3rd, 1994

Dear Harry:

Do not think it escaped my notice that you said nothing in your most recent letter about your nightmares, which I know that you are still having, as you also made no comment about the vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion I sent you not being needed. Nightmares like yours are a serious matter, Harry. If I find out that you have been having them still and not reporting them to me, you will be in Occlumency training for the entirety of this next year.

How frequent are your nightmares? How long do they last? How many do you have a night? What common images occur in them?

I am glad that you are feeling at home in Lux Aeterna. However, never forget that James has been weak before. I do not trust him. If he makes a single motion that you interpret as threatening you, contact me at once. The second owl I will send comes with books on wards. Even old houses such as that Potter wreck often have unsuspected weaknesses in the wards. I wish you to know what they are, both for reasons of your own safety and so you will know what you must attack if I ever need to come through.

I trust that Mr. Malfoy is making you rest and spend some time on yourself as well as your brother. I will write him, and if I find this is not the case, you will meet me in Diagon Alley next week, so that I can assess your condition.

To answer your questions:

Calming Potions cannot be improved by the addition of violet petals, or indeed in any other way, because their base is stagnant. That is what makes them work, but it also means they simply absorb the extra ingredients without any effect. There have been numerous experiments to improve them over the last twenty years. Nothing has ever worked. There are already violet petals in the Wolfsbane Potion. Why do you feel the need to add more? Has the wolf been threatening you?

Your notes on your Disillusionment Potion still lack answers to several basic questions. What mixture of demiguise hair and liondragon scales would possibly be stable enough to bear the addition of yet more ingredients? What would you do to protect yourself from the explosion of fumes that would follow your seventh step? How would you prevent the potion from becoming inert when you had added the lacewings’ bodies?

If I find that you have been trying to brew this potion on your own, I will not wait for any meeting in Diagon Alley. You will come back to Hogwarts with me for the summer, and you will have detention from then until next summer, as you obviously cannot be trusted with the safety of yourself and others.

Be happy.

Professor Severus Snape.

******
July 3rd, 1994

Dear Draco:

I know that you have been visiting Harry regularly at Lux Aeterna. I would like you to give me a description of his condition, in particular focusing on his nightmares, his eating habits, and how much time and attention he spends on his twin.

Professor Severus Snape.

******

July 4th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

Harry is happy, though I think it’s thanks to me and not that miserable father and brother of his. (Professor Lupin helps, sometimes, but Harry doesn’t spend that much time with him). He laughs and smiles when I see him. He’ll explore Lux Aeterna and fly with me as readily as he’ll talk with me about history or the pureblood customs or the war that’s coming. I think he’s finally learning that he can say anything to me, and it doesn’t matter; I won’t judge him or turn my back on him for it.

He seems to be sleeping relatively well, though he won’t talk about his nightmares (all right, then, there’s still one thing he won’t talk with me about). He eats well. He’s not thin or starving or anything like that.

He still spends far, far too much time on his twin. He trains Connor in dueling spells every day, at the same time, whether or not I’m there. Sometimes I visit, and he’s just sitting and listening to the prat babble on about Sirius Black and nodding, as though Harry were just a listening ear and not an equal sufferer. I’ve tried to talk to Harry about that. He shrugs, and says that he’s done a lot of his mourning, and the best way for him to heal is to listen to other people talk about it. He drives me mad.

I think the most disturbing thing is that Harry still doesn’t have any clue about the impact his magic is having on the wizarding world. He thinks he can get away with, I don’t know, just tossing power at people sometimes, and they’ll nod and give him the aid he asks for, and then that’s the end of it, a bargain for a bargain. I’ve talked to him about it several times, and now I understand. It’s a combination of things. He doesn’t want to be a Lord like Dumbledore, and asking someone else to do something without giving something immediate in return, or swearing an oath back to them, strikes him as Dumbledore-ish. He doesn’t feel as much awe of his magic as we do, because, of course, he’s living in the middle of it, and doesn’t know just how much joy it causes for other people. And he still has trouble conceiving of himself in any important role that draws other people’s attention, as opposed to some shadowy fighter whom no one really knows exists. That’s his mother’s training, I’ll bet.

But it doesn’t matter. He’s still Slytherin, and I’ll still visit him every other day, and I’m going to make sure that he doesn’t suffer for lack of Slytherin company. I’ll take good care of him, sir, for his sake and for both of ours.

Your gracious student,
Draco Malfoy.

******

July 4th, 1994

Potter:

Your son thinks I ought to write to you, in the interests of lowering our enmity. I am unconvinced that this is the best course of action. So long as I loathe you, I cannot enter Lux Aeterna, but the boy will also have a protector who is looking out for his best interests, instead of your own.

Nevertheless, Harry asked me to contact you, and I have done so.

Professor Severus Snape
July 6th, 1994

Snape:

Loathing me is not the best course of action. Neither is loathing you, I admit. For example, if you were here, perhaps you would be able to tell me why an explosion has just destroyed the anteroom that I’d let Harry set up as a Potions lab. He’s fine, but the anteroom is completely covered in orange slime.

James Potter,
Master of Lux Aeterna.

July 7th, 1994

Potter:

Harry added other ingredients to a mixture of demiguise hair and liondragon scales. Let me through the wards. I told the boy I would punish him if he attempted to make this potion, and I have the right to do so, as his legal guardian.

Snape.

July 8th, 1994

Snape:

You don’t get it, do you? I can’t just lower the wards like that. They depend on my loathing of you, and that is quite intact, thank you.

Harry has long since been punished. You forget that, while you’re writing letters from Hogwarts, I’m in the same house with him. He has apologized, though he did say specifically that he was not attempting to use demiguise hair and liondragon scales, but some other mixture of ingredients. I’ve forbidden him to work on potions for a week, and he meekly accepted that.

Speaking of which, I found a vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion in his bedroom, one that Connor hasn’t been using. I’ll thank you to stop sending Potions to my son which I haven’t approved.

James Potter.

July 9th, 1994

Potter:

You are a fool. Did you even check his lab for remnants of demiguise hair and liondragon scales? Or did you simply accept his word? Have you checked on the lab since you demanded that he stop working? Harry is a Slytherin, Potter. He is quite capable of agreeing on the surface, and pursuing something that he really wants to do under it.

I have sent the Dreamless Sleep Potion to Harry because he has been suffering from nightmares, quite savage ones, from the brief descriptions he sent me at the beginning of summer—nightmares that make his scar bleed. I trust that even you can grasp the importance of that. If he has been using it, then he has managed to escape into peace for a time, and I hope that, as the man who denied peace to him for such a large part of his childhood, you will not begrudge him this.

You may send another letter, but I shall not answer it. It is obvious that you are still an acrimonious child who cannot be trusted to look after children. I shall find some way to remove Harry from your care.
Professor Severus Snape.
******

July 10th, 1994

Harry:

It has occurred to me that while I cannot come to you, you might easily come to me. If you were to leave Lux Aeterna’s wards and give me details of a point outside of them, I could easily apparate to you. Then you could spend the rest of your summer the way it should be spent, with Slytherin companions who do not depend on you to train them and make allowances for them.

Professor Severus Snape.
******

July 11th, 1994

Snape:

You can’t take Harry away from me, not if he doesn’t want to go. And I’ve investigated the lab, thank you, and found no trace of either demiguise hair or liondragon scales, and no sign that Harry’s been working in it this past week.

James Potter.
******

July 13th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I’m sorry, sir. I don’t think leaving the wards would be a good idea. There are still Death Eaters abroad, and one of them might manage to trace me if I leave the wards for long. I’m told that my magic is rather distinctive.

Besides, there is still the same problem there always was if I am to spend the summer with you. You will not accept Connor, and my brother has to come with me. I’m just making progress in training him, and helping him to recover from the loss of Sirius. I’m not going to abandon him half-healed just because I might, possibly, have made a mistake with a potion, which was not the Disillusionment Potion, but a different one.

Thank you, sir, for your solicitude. My father is planning to bring us to Diagon Alley at the end of August; I don’t know the exact day yet. But when I do, I’ll write to you, and we can certainly plan to meet.

Harry Potter.
******

July 15th, 1994

Snape:

Damn it, answer me, you bastard!

James Potter.
******

July 17th, 1994

Harry:
It seems that, as you are intent on thinking the best of those with you, and that they need more healing than, in fact, they do, another form of proof is needed. Enclosed please find the letters that your father has sent me in the past few weeks. In the latest one, he descended to impugning my parentage. Once you have read them, perhaps you will agree that it is best for you to leave a house in which the man who calls himself your father makes no effort to do what is really best for his son.

Professor Severus Snape.

*******

July 18th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I’ve read the letters, and talked to my father about them. He showed me the letters that you had sent him in return.

I’m not going to say they were worse than his. They were about the same, really: the writings of a man who cannot get over a childish grudge, who claims to love me but, really, doesn’t seem to show it.

I understand that you may not be able to heal this enmity overnight. Do know that I am asking you to try. If you cannot, then, please, simply be satisfied with meeting me at the end of August, as I will send you no more letters.

I can see your face now, worrying over whether James will be receiving equal treatment to you. Oh, yes, he will. Be assured. I am perfectly capable of ignoring someone even though he lives in the same house with me.

You were plaguing me with questions about my feelings, I believe, sir, earlier in the summer. At the moment, I am coldly furious with both of you.

Harry.

*******

July 20th, 1994

Dear Harry:

I have taken a few days to consider the matter, and I have decided that you were right. Please forgive me.

I am unhappy with having you so far away, relying on second-hand reports—even yours must be considered second-hand reports, because I do not have the evidence of my own eyes to balance them with—of your health and safety. I do not want you to destroy yourself. That has nothing to do with your being James’s son, a pawn in any game I might wish to play against him, or a Slytherin I think is powerful and magically talented. It has to do with your being Harry.

I do not want to lose you, and knowing I cannot be there to help protect you is driving me slowly mad.

Please, stay safe. I will plague you with no more questions about nightmares if you do this for me. Do not brew dangerous Potions. Do not venture outside the house’s wards; I was wrong to encourage you to do so. Spend time on your own healing, as well as your brother’s. Do nothing to antagonize anyone who might hurt you.

I ask you to do these things, because I can do nothing else right now.

Professor Severus Snape.

*******

July 20th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I understand how hard it was for you to write that letter, and I accept your apologies.

I am staying safe. I have written down a list of my nightmares, which I’ll enclose and send to you, though in truth they’re so
disjointed that I don’t think they mean much. The Dreamless Sleep Potion has been helping.

Draco visited yesterday, and managed to coax me into letting Remus take over Connor’s training session. I hate to admit it, but I think it may have helped both of them. Remus has been feeling more or less useless ever since we came here—not wanting to intrude on the bond that James has been rebuilding with both of us, but not knowing what else to do with himself. And Connor…damn it, Draco was right—

Excuse me, Professor Snape. Draco would not stop laughing when he read what I’d written over my shoulder. Getting him to shut up was in order.

I’m not going to repeat it. He can see it. Connor needs someone who won’t hold back with him the way I tend to do. Remus knows how to teach someone. It’s working fine, and Connor was even impressed when they were done.

Of course, Draco didn’t let me watch them for very long. We went flying, and then I introduced him to the Maze—it just watched him—and then I got your letter.

You are my legal guardian, and I want you to stay that way. I know it’s hard trying to write to the wizard who saved your life. But, even given that both of those things are true, other things are also true. James is my blood father, and he wants to be a father in affection, too. I want that. I never want to choose between you, but if it came down to a choice, then it would lie with the one who had the most commitment to making my life easier. Right now, both of you are making it very hard by not even making an attempt to get along.

But I do trust that you will try. Thank you.

Harry.

********

July 21st, 1994

James:

I am impressed that you wrote back. I didn’t think you had it in you.

I have taken time to think over what sort of advice I ought to give you about Harry, and my best piece is not to trust everything the boy says about himself. I know that you might be inclined to accept what he is on the surface and not look any deeper, but you have to. Harry knows a great deal about the world, and almost nothing about himself.

Watch him. Note the way he reacts to things, even when he doesn’t realize he’s doing so, or when you might be tempted to consider the reactions trivial. You could probably name a dozen things that Connor likes, foods or sweets or games or Quidditch teams, without even trying. Can you say the same about Harry? If not, start building up the bond.

Be honest with him. He’s been lied to enough in his life. He has to know that when someone says he loves him, he really means it this time. Otherwise, he’ll give chances, and give chances, and get hurt in the meantime, until he finally cuts that person out of his mind and heart. And remember, James, I hear that you’ve hurt him, and you’ll have a bit of a rat problem.

Don’t try to make him reconcile with Lily. He doesn’t have to. He doesn’t need her any longer. I know you love her, but Harry doesn’t have to.

Be respectful of the people who did manage to make a dent in his heart—Snape, the Malfoy boy, his brother.

Make sure you speak with him about Sirius. I have no words for how horrible that was, James. I miss him, too, the stupid, stubborn son of a bitch. And I was the one who went to Azkaban for him. I can’t imagine what Harry must be feeling. Sirius was his godfather, and Harry hadn’t got to the point of cutting him out of his mind and heart yet.

I suppose the ideal thing to say would be for you to find a balance between your sons, but I really do think that Harry needs more attention. Don’t let him fob you off, or distract you by referring to Connor. I saw him do that a few times when I was in the school to watch over him. He knew that other people would want to talk about Connor because he was the Boy-Who-Lived, or because they disliked him, and he would get that person to start thinking about Connor and stop paying attention to him. That’s a relic of Lily’s training, I think.

I don’t know about rebuilding our friendship yet. For now, I’ll take these letters, to discuss a boy who’s been hurt enough in
his life, Merlin knows.

Peter.

******

July 23rd, 1994

James:

I want to see the boys. Please. Can’t I talk to them? And you, as well? Don’t you miss the house at Godric’s Hollow? It was our home for so many years. I do love you, and them, and miss you, and them.

Please, come back home.

Love,

Lily.

******

July 25th, 1994

Dear Lily:

I’m sorry. You didn’t answer either of the questions I asked you. I can’t let you see them. I think it would be best if we stopped writing for now.

James.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Two: Spiders on a Dead Web

“Dad, why doesn’t Lux Aeterna have house elves?”

James blinked and looked up from his bowl of beef stew. Harry was frowning intently at him from the other end of the table.

“Because we don’t need them,” James replied, sipping at his spoon again. “You must have noticed by now that our food just appears, the way that it does at Hogwarts, and yet we don’t have house elves around?”

Harry frowned. “I should have,” he said, his voice subdued. He leaned back in his chair and stared around Lux Aeterna’s dining hall. The walls were pierced with half a dozen windows on either side, not that that was unusual; in this case, they let in the late summer sunlight. James sometimes wondered whose bright idea it had been to hang mirrors among the windows, to bounce and reflect the light. Probably his grandmother Matilda, he thought. She was always searching for ways to declare the family’s new, formal allegiance to Light in symbolic terms as well as in her words and actions. “But I was focused on Connor.”

James glanced carefully around the hall, despite the fact that he knew Connor had gone outside to practice with Remus in a duel. Perhaps now was a good time to speak with Harry about his devotion to his brother, when Connor had no chance of overhearing them.

“So, why not?”

In a minute, then, when he can be persuaded to leave the subject of house elves, James promised himself, and finished his stew and pushed the bowl away. It vanished in a moment. Harry eyed it, then looked at him.

“We don’t need them,” James explained, leaning back in his chair. “We were able to persuade brownies to work for us a long time ago, and they take the place of house elves.”

Harry shook his head slowly, his eyes bearing the glassy look that James knew meant he was searching his head for memories. “I don’t know much about brownies. Why did they agree to work for us?”
“Brownies live in colonies,” James said, smiling slightly at how much he sounded like his grandmother. Matilda Potter had been so anxious to make the family Light in every conceivable way, and she had delighted in telling the tale of how she had got free-willed but calm and domestic servants to anyone who would listen. “The colony nearest Lux Aeterna was kidnapped by goblins one day, all but their king. He appealed to my grandmother—that would be your great-grandmother—“

“I know,” said Harry, his voice bearing just the hint of a snappish tone.

He doesn’t like to be treated as if he’s stupid, James noted to himself. See, Peter? I’m watching him. “He appealed to my grandmother for help,” he continued smoothly. “She not only got his colony back, she worked spells to insure that no goblins could ever kidnap them again. He offered her a service in exchange for her service, and she asked him to care for Lux Aeterna, with the help of his colony.”

“I wondered why nothing was ever dusty here,” said Harry, looking around the dining hall at the faint golden-brown gleam of the rich wood. James himself wasn’t sure what kind of wood it was, only that the trees didn’t grow anymore. “I didn’t think you’d had time to clean the entire house by yourself, even during the months you were hiding.”

James nodded. “The brownies aren’t like house elves. They delight in cleanliness, so they’ll wash our clothes and cook our food and clean up our dishes and so on, but they don’t much like wizards, and they certainly aren’t subservient.” He winced, and massaged a faint scar on his hand. Trying to trap a brownie engaged in cleaning up wasn’t the smartest thing any child could do, even a wizard child who already had his wand. “So they work for us, but they stay out of our way, and we stay out of theirs.”

“And the Potters let their house elves go?” Harry surmised.

James nodded. “What made you think of it?”

Harry stared at a point above his head, reminding James of a Kneazle kitten he’d had when he was seven. “I can see the web,” he whispered.

James actually turned to look at the ceiling, where it seemed Harry was staring, but could see nothing. He frowned. “What do you mean?”

Harry didn’t respond. When James turned around again, Harry was rubbing his eyes. He sighed, and said, “I can see the bindings on magical creatures. The webs that tie house elves to our service, for example, and the webs in the Forbidden Forest that bind unicorns to be less dangerous in their beauty, and the web that tied the Dementors to Azkaban.” He looked at James. “I told you about that.”

James nodded slowly. He’d gone to Harry when he received the first Ministry letter complaining that they no longer had any reliable means of keeping the prisoners at Azkaban, excepting anti-Apparition wards and wizard guards. James had so far fobbed them off by pointing out that, so far as he knew, freeing Dementors and sending them home into nightmares wasn’t an actual crime. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was scrambling among the obscure laws, trying to come up with one that they could charge Harry under.

The latest letter was something of a puzzle, there. It reassured James that Harry wouldn’t have any more trouble until the Ministry could actually find the forms that it required to charge him and fill them out, in triplicate. It hadn’t been signed, but Harry had given a fleeting grin when he’d seen it.

“Well, I can see the webs that used to tie house elves here, but they aren’t engaged,” said Harry, and waved his hand. “They’re just—floating in the air. I can’t describe it, really. They’re torn and tattered, and they shine gold, like threads of silk from clothing.” He shrugged. “So I figured some other kind of magical creature had to be doing the cleaning.”

He shifted to look at his father, and James just barely swallowed a gasp. Harry’s eyes were burning. It was a look that James had never seen on him, and one that he couldn’t connect to what he knew of Lily, either. It seemed this expression of ferocious, bloody-minded determination was Harry’s alone.

“Why couldn’t everyone do that?” he asked, with a tone in his voice that might have been anger or simple passion. “Why can’t everyone call on a colony of brownies to clean their houses, instead of enslaving house elves?”

James blinked. “Harry, house elves aren’t enslaved. I told you, brownies are very different. House elves welcome their service—“
“I spoke with one of them,” Harry interrupted him. “He said that house elves have multiple webs on them, and one of them makes it impossible for them to rebel.”

James frowned slightly. He was missing something here. He had to be. “Harry, you said that you wanted to be vates.”

Harry nodded, eyes never blinking. James winced. Facing a stare like that for long was enough to make sweat pop out on his forehead.

“But you didn’t say that you were trying to become it,” James continued. “I didn’t know you were having…well, conversations with house elves, and learning history that’s not normal wizarding history.” *Freedng Dementors is one thing, they were dangers to everyone and should have gone back to nightmares long ago, but can he conceive of how much things would have to change overnight if he were to free house elves?*

“I am,” said Harry. “There was a prophecy, Dad, Connor’s prophecy that he told you about.”

James nodded again. He’d wanted to understand everything about the night that his boys had faced Sirius, possessed by Voldemort, and nearly died. The Maze had shown it to him, but hadn’t been able to tell him what Harry and Connor had felt.

“I thought that prophecy applied only for that one night,” he said.

Harry shook his head and then leaped to his feet, pacing back and forth. “No,” he breathed. “It was about the first decision I’d make as a vates, the one decision that set the path for all. I asked the Dementors what they wanted me to do. They told me. I refused their first suggestion and bargained them down to a different one, going home into nightmares. But now I need to start thinking about the other magical creatures.” He turned to James. “I probably should have thought about it before now, but I was busy with Connor.”

James leaned forward. *I meant to address this, and he got me side-tracked again. Harry has a habit of doing that.* “Because you’re no longer training your brother in dueling spells doesn’t mean that you need to sacrifice yourself to some other cause, Harry,” he said. *There, those words sound right.* “You don’t have an obligation to think about freeing magical creatures.”

“It’s not an obligation,” Harry murmured. “It can’t be, or it would be against the nature of what being a vates is. It’s something I want to do.”

“Why?” James asked. Harry had explained what a vates was and what it had to do with webs and how he had freed the Dementors, but he had never explained why his own desire ran so strongly to this odd task. “What do you hate so much about the bindings on magical creatures?”

“That they’re there,” said Harry, and his face shuttered around his burning eyes. “I was a slave, and I don’t see why anyone else should have to be.” James felt the burgeoning buzz of his son’s magic, which to him had always seemed the smell of the sea. “And you didn’t answer my questions. Why doesn’t everyone do a service for a colony of brownies, instead of enslaving house elves?”

“Brownies don’t live everywhere,” said James. “Northumberland has the largest population of them left. They don’t do well in crowded wizarding environments like Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley. Even the ones here were happier when no one else lived in the house, I think. Harry, you have to see that it isn’t as simple as switching brownies for house elves.”

Harry laughed. James flinched. It wasn’t the kind of laugh his son had been giving lately, contented and free with Draco, or even muted the way it was in the presence of other people. It was wild, and bitter, and it ended with Harry snorting and muttering, “I long ago realized that nothing is ever simple.”

He shook his head when James started to stand up in concern. “I really am fine,” he said quietly. “Just tired. And worrying on this. I shouldn’t worry on it, I know. I should start sorting out solutions. I think I’ll go read a book that might tell me how. Thank you for telling me about the brownies.”

He slipped out of the dining hall. Frowning, James stood, and watched as the last remnants of their dinner vanished with brisk efficiency.

He was halfway up the stairs to his study when he realized that Harry had deflected him, once again, from asking about how Harry spent his time and poured himself into what he perceived as his duties.

******
“Hello, Hermione.”

Hermione dusted off her hair as she stepped out of the fireplace and nodded to Harry. “That was different from any floo trip I’ve been on,” she said. “Did you know that there’s something in your fireplace that makes you wait while it examines you and decides to let you through?” It had been an ugly face, which fixed red eyes on her. Hermione had frowned back, trying to decide if it was a gargoyle. She had been almost disappointed that she didn’t have longer to study it when it abruptly whisked her forward again.

“Is there?” Harry looked startled. “I haven’t traveled by Floo since we got here, and I didn’t notice that.”

Hermione shrugged. “You probably have it easier because you’re a Potter.” She rummaged in her bookbag. “You should see the histories I’ve brought along, Harry, your family’s in almost all of them. A Reasoned Discussion of Light Wizards. Tactics of the Firestar Wars. Fighting Dark Lords: A Beginner’s Guide. I think you’ll enjoy them.”

She glanced up to find Harry watching her with a faint smile on his mouth. “What?” she snapped, fiddling with her hair. She knew that the Floo journey tended to disarray it, but she didn’t see how she was supposed to keep it straight when she was spinning through fireplace after fireplace and brushing her head against their roofs and covering herself with soot.

“I’ve missed you, Hermione, that’s all,” Harry said, and moved forward to give her a hug. Hermione hugged him back, and glanced around. The room where he’d met her seemed to be kept as a sort of welcoming room. It had a few murals on the walls, but only simple chairs, and nothing that encouraged guests to linger. “Connor’s downstairs,” he added, drawing her gaze to him.

Hermione blinked. “Not up here with you?”

“He’s playing Exploding Snap with Ron,” said Harry, falling into step beside her as she headed for the door. This was more like what she had expected a grand old pureblood house to look like, Hermione thought, as she studied the door. The door was intricately carved oak wood, with a creature that resembled both a griffin and a dragon writhing around whorls of sunbursts. “He didn’t know you were coming,” Harry added, and that drew Hermione’s attention from the door.

“I thought he invited me,” she said.

“No. Um. I did.” Harry hesitated, then turned his hands up. “I wanted to see you, and I know that you wanted to see Lux Aeterna,” he finished.

Hermione frowned and folded her arms. I think we better straighten some things out right here and now. “Is he still my friend, Harry?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry, running a hand through his hair. “I think so, but I don’t know how things stood between you at the end of the year.”

“Awful,” said Hermione crisply. Her mind tossed her memories of countless uncomfortable nights in the Gryffindor common room, where Connor sat on one end of it, she sat on the other, and Ron shuttled back and forth between them with a desperately unhappy expression on his face. “He sort of apologized, but never properly. And he was always muttering about you all the time.”

“You know why, now,” said Harry, his voice pleading.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Harry, I can’t forgive him that easily,” she said. “I had to pry the story out of him step by step.”

“But what he went through was awful,” Harry said.

“And what you went through was awful, and yet you never did the same kinds of things to me,” said Hermione. She tapped her foot when Harry just looked at her in incomprehension. She knew Harry was smart, but sometimes he could be awfully dense about things like this, though he was still better than his twin. “I’m still angry, Harry. He had every chance to patch things up with me, and he didn’t.”

“Well, maybe now he can?” Harry made it a question, leaving it up to her.

Hermione sighed. She’d thought that the invitation was from Connor, and represented an extended hand that she sorely
wanted. She wasn’t sure how she felt, knowing that Harry had been the one to arrange things for his twin’s best benefit, as always.

Then she smiled. *Well, I’ll just arrange things so that Connor can’t lean on Harry this time.*

“I’ll talk to him,” she agreed. “Alone,” she added, and stole Harry’s own widening smile.

“Um, I’m not sure—“ Harry began.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. *There’s such a thing as going too far.* “Harry James Potter,” she said. “Your brother’s nearly as old as you are. I’m sure that he can make up with me without you there to hold his hand.”

Harry’s face abruptly flushed, but to Hermione’s shock, he didn’t yell at or disagree with her. “That’s just what Draco said,” he whispered. “That I do too much sticking up for him, too much interfering for him. He’s kept saying it, over and over, these past few days.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. She didn’t like having anything in common with Draco Bloody Malfoy. On the other hand, he hadn’t called her “Mudblood” once in the last few months they were at Hogwarts, which she supposed made him—all right. Not any less of an enormously arrogant and obnoxious prat, but all right.

“Yes, I think you do,” she said, keeping her voice gentle. “So let me talk to him, Harry. Alone.”

Harry nodded, and opened the door.

They emerged onto a balcony that extended out over a wide, sweeping hall. Hermione caught her breath. She didn’t think that she’d ever seen such a lovely, gracious old place. The walls didn’t actually spiral inward to settle around the floor, but it felt that way, because of the spiraling grains of the wood. Everywhere she looked was gold—not actual gold, but reflected sunlight from cunningly placed mirrors. Windchimes rustled with delicate music in the breeze through the windows. They weren’t made of silver, as Hermione expected, but a delicate amber-colored material. The lower portion of the walls was done in a mural of scalloped wings, curling around the floor.

In the center of it, Ron and Connor were playing Exploding Snap, and laughing their heads off.

Hermione felt her heart lighten and lift when she saw them, for all that it was probably, at least in part, the effect of that beautiful room. She was glad, really, that Connor looked happier than he had in those last few miserable weeks at school. Even from here, she could see that his face was flushed with merriment, and somewhat tanned from time in the sun, and his eyes were much brighter. And Ron looked content as he hadn’t when he was trying to keep every second person from asking Connor what had happened and how Sirius Black had really died.

But they were still infuriating.

Connor paused, his gaze drawn by their movement on the balcony, probably, and froze when he looked up and saw her.

Hermione gave him her most threatening glare in return.

Ron stood up when he saw her.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Ron had acted like she was about to hurt Connor for at least half the time they were at Hogwarts after the incident with Sirius Black—which meant the times he was on the far side of the common room with Connor. If he’d spent enough time with him this summer, he’d probably forgotten about all the reassurances Hermione had given him, reassurances that she really did want to make up with Connor.

“I think we should go down,” said Harry, and guided her to the stairs. Hermione followed him. Ron’s fists were clenching, and his face turning red. Connor just watched her. His own face looked pale, but resolute.

Harry halted in front of both of them and met Ron’s gaze. “Hermione wants to talk to Connor privately,” he said. “So let’s let them.”

“She’ll hurt him,” said Ron, and gave her a suspicious glance. Hermione managed to refrain from rolling her eyes again, but it was a near thing. She reminded herself that Ron was just being loyal, and Connor had probably needed that this summer. “He’s just starting to recover, and—“
“It’s been more than two months, Ron,” said Harry, so softly that Hermione wasn’t convinced his brother could hear them. “If he hasn’t started to recover now, then it’s time to pull off the scab.”

Ron stared hard at Harry for a moment, then at Connor. Hermione looked at him, too. He’d wiped his face clean of expression, though.

Ron said, “Well, what do you think, mate? Do you want to talk to her?”

“I think I have to,” Connor muttered.

“That’s not an answer—“ Ron began.

“Yes, it is.” Harry took Ron’s arm and hauled him away, meeting Hermione’s eyes over his shoulder for a minute. “We’ll see you when you’ve made up, Hermione. Or when one of you comes storming out of the room, I suppose.” He flashed her a faint smile, then led Ron to the far side of the hall and firmly out a door there.

Left alone with Connor, Hermione put her hands on her hips. “You never did really admit that you were wrong,” she said evenly.

Connor listlessly turned over one of the Exploding Snap cards he and Ron had been playing with, and then jumped as it exploded. “But I did,” he said. “I told you what happened. I am sorry for saying what I did to you, and not really making up with you, Hermione.” He stared at her. “What else do you want me to say?”

“That you won’t do it again,” said Hermione. “And then start acting natural around me again. If you really did think you apologized, why were you looking at me the way you did when I came down the stairs?”

“You can’t possibly have seen the expression on my face from that far away,” Connor objected, standing up and turning slightly away from her.

“Yes, I did,” said Hermione. “And now tell me why you were looking that way.”

Connor took a deep breath and moved his hands in front of him, clenching and relaxing on different parts of his arms. It was a gesture Hermione hadn’t seen him make before. She suspected he’d been trained to do it by someone else, probably Harry. “I know that eventually this summer will end,” he whispered. “I know that eventually I have to go back to Hogwarts and face everyone else. That’s going to be hard. Harry’s told me how most of the school regarded me by the time the year ended, and I was too blind to see it. But...do I have to face it now, in the middle of the summer? I didn’t really want to talk to you, Hermione, and that’s why.”

Hermione tapped her foot again. “It’s only too obvious that he’s used to leaning on other people to do his thinking for him. That’ll have to stop soon. Harry’s not always going to be there, and neither am I. Think of this as practice,” she said. “You only need to face one person instead of hundreds. And if you can’t face the one person, then you need lots more practice.”

Connor turned around slowly. “But how do you get past that?” he whispered. “Are you really capable of forgiving me?”

Hermione snorted. “Of course. I forgave you for that business with compulsion in our second year.”

Connor’s face reflected confusion for a moment. “I thought you did that by thinking my compulsion gift was good, part of the Light.”

Hermione stared at him. “Of course not. I still think it could be nasty, and Hogwarts, A History classifies it as a Dark gift and talks about the Blacks who had it and the nasty things they did with it.” She restrained herself from telling a story about Orion Black and how he’d compelled the professors of Hogwarts into doing a jig in the middle of the Great Hall. Connor probably wouldn’t understand the comparison, and he’d probably never heard of Orion Black, either. “But I got past it by forgiving you.”

Connor nodded slowly.

Hermione cocked her head to the side. “Is that the way you get past wrongs that others have done you? By considering them part of the Light?”

Connor laughed, but it was too loud.
“You do, I think,” said Hermione. A few things she’d heard during the last few weeks of the term now suddenly made sense. “You were able to forgive Sirius because he died heroically. You were able to forgive Harry because he fought to save you. And you don’t see how anyone can forgive you, because you’ve been thinking about what you’ve done, and you can’t make it sound good or like it was part of the Light.”

“Leave it, Hermione,” said Connor, voice gone suddenly tight.

“No,” said Hermione. “Not everyone thinks the same way as you do, Connor. I really forgave you for compelling me. And I would forgive you for being a prat, if you would just tell me things like this, that you’re afraid I’m going to carry around a grudge against you no matter how much you apologize. Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s better to tell people these things?”

“Sirius said not to,” Connor whispered, “that it was a weakness my enemies could use against me.”

“And was this before or after he was possessed by You-Know-Who?” Hermione inquired.

“I don’t know!” Connor let out a frustrated shout, and Hermione sneezed. His magic was rising around him, not as strong as Harry’s, but still thick. “I don’t know how to trust what he told me, how to forgive him, sometimes, for not saying that he just was possessed.”

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head. “It would have all been a lot easier if you’d just told me this.”

They stood in silence for a few moments, while Connor’s level of power dropped down from dramatic.

“So you do forgive me?” His voice was unsteady now.

Hermione peered at him hard. His eyes were hopeful, bright and endearing, the eyes of a small dog that Hermione’s neighbors had once had, which begged for sweets the same way.

Trouble was, Hermione had always got bitten when she put her hand near that little dog’s mouth.

“I can forgive you if you make an effort to actually forgive other people,” said Hermione. “And stand and learn on your own. I think you’ve been hiding here.” She hesitated for a moment, then forged ahead. “And have you spoken to Harry at all about his version of what happened in the Shrieking Shack?”

“He said it was settled,” said Connor. “That he didn’t have nightmares about it any more.” His eyes reflected envy of that.

“Oh, Connor,” said Hermione, feeling both exasperated and sorry for him. It would be hard being stuck with a brother like Harry, who hid everything that was true of himself as a matter of course. “I don’t think so. Harry would say anything if he thought it would spare you further hurt. Talk to him, all right? And then when you come back to school, watch him. See how he forgives people. He certainly doesn’t have to think they’re part of the Light to do it. It can give you some good training in tolerance and compassion.”

“I keep making promises to do things,” said Connor. “And then people say I don’t fulfill the promises, no matter what I try.” He looked as mulish as Harry could, for a moment, but it passed quickly. He let out a deep breath and met her eyes squarely for the first time in the conversation. “But I want to try this time.”

“Good,” Hermione said, and put out her hand. “Friends again?”

Connor grasped her hand firmly and shook.

“Good,” Hermione repeated, and turned towards the door at the far end of the hall. “We can tell Harry that neither of us will be storming out of the room.”

She was glad that was all settled. When she talked to Harry again, she would have to ask about the history of this house, and the difference between Light and Dark pureblood rituals. The books she’d found on the subject had all been surprisingly reticent, as if neither side wanted to commit too much of themselves to paper.

*Maybe I can even borrow books from their library!*
“How are you doing, mate?”

Harry blinked and looked away from the scene of Lux Aeterna’s lawn that he was contemplating beyond the window. He had expected to stand in silence with Ron from the beginning of Hermione and Connor’s conversation to the end of it. Ron didn’t generally say much to him beyond quick, embarrassed comments that attempted to include Harry in his and Connor’s conversations.

But now he was leaning on the wall and watching Harry with that chess-player’s look on his face that Harry had seen once before, when he told Harry about the magic he radiated, which other purebloods could sense.

Harry shrugged. “What context do you mean it in?”

“How are you doing, mate?”

“Only you would want a bloody context,” Ron muttered, but he didn’t really look upset. “I mean, do you still have nightmares? Connor looks all right, really, but what about you?”

Harry blinked, then smiled slightly. Ron was attempting to express concern for him. It was…endearing, if only because it was so completely different from the way a Slytherin would have. Draco would have charged ahead, asking questions and making assumptions until Harry was forced to correct him. Snape would observe him in silence and pop out with the correct answer later. Ron just asked, and his face was already going red in embarrassment as the silence stretched and Harry didn’t answer.

“I’m fine, really,” said Harry. “No more nightmares about Sirius.” And that was true. His dreams still remained the disjointed, rambling things they had been all summer, full of thorns and plains of ice and a voice murmuring about the sun, how it rose and set and had the earth turn about it on the solstices and equinoxes. He noticed Ron’s expression lighten, and decided there was no need to mention the other nightmares, especially when he didn’t understand them himself. “Why are you asking?”

Ron rubbed his face with one hand. “Well, you’re really important to Connor,” he muttered. “And I don’t know you much, and sometimes we haven’t got on much. I thought I should ask.”

Harry cocked his head. “So you can see both of us being important to Connor for a long time?”

“Yes, something like that.” Ron didn’t sound as though he’d worked it all out in his head, and he drew his wand. Harry straightened, but Ron didn’t seem to notice. “Would you mind dueling with me on a few spells, mate? Something to pass the time. I know nothing I do can hurt you.”

“Alright,” said Harry, and pulled his own wand out. A few spells insured this room was right for dueling, including practice mats and Shield Charms on the walls. Ron watched admiringly. Harry glanced back at him. “What kind of spells would you most like to learn?”

“Something embarrassing,” said Ron. “Something I could actually hit Fred and George with the next time they humiliate me.”

Interested, Harry peered at Ron. He would have to see what Ron’s level of power was, to see if he could ever match the twins no matter what spells Harry taught him. The twins were very odd, magical geniuses who also had a latent ability to deflect most low-level spells aimed at them. The ability manifested most of the time as a simple missing of the hex, which bounced past them and gave Fred and George a chance to retaliate. Harry knew the twins were some of the strongest wizards in the school, right below Hermione, but he didn’t know anything about Ron’s magic.

He blinked. Well, that’s odd.

“What’s the matter?” Ron demanded. “Why’re you looking at me like that?”

Harry shook his head slightly. “There’s a block on your magic,” he said. “A level it can’t rise past. It looks like a lid on top of a box full of light.” He broke out of his magic-seeing and glanced at Ron. “Do you know what that is?”

Ron looked crestfallen. “Yeah,” he muttered, scuffling a trainer on the floor. “Bill cast a hex at me when I was seven, and Charlie cast one at the same time. Somehow, they collided in me and…formed that. The mediwitch Mum took me to said that it had to heal on its own, and until it did, my magic would be restrained. I kind of hoped it would have gone away by now, though. I mean, it’s been seven bloody years.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I don’t know, I was really angry when the
“Hexes hit me, and she said it might heal if I could be calm.”

Harry smiled. “I don’t think you can do that.”

“No, me neither,” Ron agreed, and lifted his wand. “Unless you think you can heal it?” His face and his words were full of ill-guarded hope.

Harry peered once more at the block. It sat firm and strong, not a web to his sight, but a seamless lid. “Sorry, no.”

Ron sighed. “Well, just teach me what spells you can teach me.”

Harry showed him the *Apis Occaeco* hex, which caused the victim to feel as though invisible bees were stinging him all along his wand hand. Ron yelped and dropped his wand, but agreed it was a good one, and even got most of the wrist flicks and pronunciation right when Harry corrected him a few times.

Harry studied Ron as he once again triumphantly repeated *Apis*, but faltered on *Occaeco*. He was a good friend to Connor, that was certain. And he was a Light pureblooded wizard. Harry understood a few more things about them, now that he’d spent time in Lux Aeterna.

*And I understand more things about my family than I ever cared to.*

Harry jumped. That voice hadn’t been his. “Regulus?” he whispered. Ron looked at him curiously.

*Yes. Did you think I’d gone away forever?*

*I wondered,* Harry said, even as he said aloud, “No, Ron, slight lifting of your voice on the second syllable of *Occaeco.*” I hadn’t heard from you in a long time.

*I went to try and find out where the bloody hell I am, and I won’t ask you to pardon me, since I hear you use worse language all the time. And it didn’t work. All I really know is that I’m in some small and dark place, and the worse pain Voldemort tortured me with hasn’t come back.*

*So, not much more than before.*

*No.*

*Well, I said that I’d help you get free, and I will,* Harry promised him. I—

*“Apis Occaeco!”*

Harry jumped as the sensation of stinging bees coiled around his left hand. He didn’t drop his wand, since that was in his right, but he did nod to Ron and have to shake away the sting. “Impressive,” he said.

“I got you!” Ron looked gleeful about his success, one moment away from jumping up and down.

Harry nodded again. “Yes, you did.” *And that was a lesson, Harry. Never let yourself be too distracted, even by private conversations in your head. Someone might sneak up and kill Connor while you’re involved in a chat.*

“That was fun,” said Ron contemplatively. “We’ll see if I can’t do it again.” He raised his wand.

Hermione and Connor knocked on the door just then and came in, so Harry didn’t have to let Ron do it again, or admit out loud why he had jumped. He did see Connor shooting him concerned glances, so he managed several reassuring smiles. He was busy listening to Regulus, though, and trying to figure out from the very limited descriptions he was able to give if he could help.

*Well, let’s start with the smallness,* he said at last, *since I don’t think I can help much with the darkness or the pain right now.*

*All right,* Regulus said sulkily. *I want to see the sun again.*

*You can see it through my eyes.*
Not the same thing.

Harry agreed that it was not, and began naming off a long checklist of small places that Regulus might be crammed into, while Regulus tried to decide if they sounded like they matched his prison. Harry showed Hermione the library, had dinner, and evaded another of his father’s ridiculous bouts of being too concerned about him while he was doing it.

No one seemed to notice. It was easy, really, Harry reflected, to hide what was going on in his head.

******

Harry blinked. He wasn’t used to owls waking him in the middle of the night, especially not owls who pecked him on the cheek to deliver their letters. He sat up slowly, stretching his arms, and called *Lumos* with a wave of his hand, so he could see.

*Who’s writing you?* Regulus demanded.

*I don’t know*, Harry said, and blinked further when he saw that there were two more owls lined up on the windowsill. *Three. What do they want with me?*

*To deliver letters.*

*I knew that*, Harry pointed out, even as he relieved the eagle-owl sitting on his bed of its burden. *If I have to have other voices in my head, they should at least think thoughts I wouldn’t have.*

Regulus sniffed and retreated.

Harry glanced down at the letter he held in his hands, smiling slightly as he recognized the handwriting on the outside of the envelope. Ripping it open, he studied the message.

**Dear Mr. Potter:**

*I am writing this as a request for a formal meeting. I would like to come and see you on your birthday, and of course Draco wants to come with me. I shall bring my sister, Andromeda Black Tonks, with me, as well as her daughter, Nymphadora Tonks. They are both interested in meeting you, and Andromeda may wish to enter into an alliance.*

*I await your owl.*

*Narcissa Malfoy.*

Harry bit his lip for a moment, but in the end, he could see no reason not to grant permission for it. Draco would have wanted to come on his birthday anyway, Narcissa was welcome, and Harry was curious what Narcissa’s sister and niece would have to say. He scribbled out a reply and sent the eagle-owl home happy.

The second one fluttered forward, and Harry realized in some surprise that it wasn’t an owl at all; he’d simply assumed it was because it was dark and he didn’t have his glasses. It was a gull, which regarded him with even more haughtiness than an owl as he took the message from its webbed foot. Then it pecked his hand—for no especial reason, Harry thought, or maybe just in case he had food.

The message was sharp and crabbed, as though it had been written by someone not used to holding a quill, and it had no salutation.

*We have heard the rumors that you are a vates. We wish to meet you and discuss our future freedom. I speak for the goblin class of Northland: Seadampin, Waterrune, Ternretten, Stonecantor.*

*Our gulls are by far cleverer than your owls. Speak your answer, and he will know it and bring it back to us.*

*Helcas Seadampin.*

Harry felt his breath tingle in his lungs. He had been awaiting a summons like this, and it seemed it had finally come. He met the gull’s eye.
“Tell Helcas Seadampin I will come, though I need more information on where and when,” he said.

The gull spread its wings, and then abruptly dissipated into a shower of white sparks. Harry watched them rain down on his bed, burning nothing, since they fluttered out before they touched the blankets, and swallowed. He had not known that the goblins had such formidable magic.

He shook his head slightly, and then turned to regard the third owl. It looked rather anemic, and barely raised its head when he called. Harry had to walk over to it and remove its letter.

*Potter:*

_Samuel Taylor Coleridge spoke of an albatross hanging around one’s neck. He was not really a Muggle poet, but a Squib. Did you know that his mother was a witch who never acknowledged her heritage after her wand was broken for casting an Unforgivable when she was eleven? She cast it at a Muggle, and the Muggle died. And then she married a Muggle. What a waste of talent, in both ways._

Harry stared at the parchment. _What?_

The letter went on.

_The sailors hung the albatross around the Ancient Mariner’s neck to be a burden, because he’d shot the sacred bird and thus cursed them, and always had to be reminded of his actions. Let me be your albatross, then._

_Greetings._

_Evan Rosier._

Harry hissed. The name was the name of a Death Eater, who for a very long time he had believed dead, killed in one of the battles of the First War the year he and Connor were born. But he’d seen the man alive in May, the night he killed Rodolphus —

With practiced ease, Harry cut off the thought, and stared hard at the letter. Why would Evan Rosier be writing to him? Why was he rambling on about Squib poets and albatrosses and witches who killed Muggles?

_More to the point, he realized abruptly, how did the owl bearing a known Death Eater’s letter get past the wards surrounding Lux Aeterna? They should have kept anything a Death Eater had touched out._ They’d made Harry’s hand tingle for hours afterward just because he’d touched Snape’s arm when his guardian originally tried to come through the wards.

It was a mystery, and one that Harry didn’t like.

“No response,” he told the owl.

The owl gave a feeble hoot and turned to fly away. Then it collapsed to the carpet. Harry kneeled beside it and watched one talon flex and then slowly close again.

_Dead_, he realized. _Perhaps the effort of getting through the wards was too much for it._

He backed carefully away from it, not needing the echo of Snape’s voice in his head to know that touching the dead bird wasn’t a good idea, and hoped the brownies would dispose of it. He would write Snape in the morning, and tell him about Rosier’s letter. Snape had been a Death Eater, had known him firsthand. Perhaps he would know what Rosier was on about.

With an effort, Harry turned his thoughts towards the meetings with the goblins and the Tonks instead. He felt a pleasant tingle of excitement.

_Finally, I’m going to be doing something._

---

**Chapter Three: Griphook Fishbaggin’s Legacy**

*Harry:*
Convince your father to lower the wards.

Harry sighed and shook his head. He had known Snape would act like this, though he had sent the letter anyway, thinking his guardian had the right to be informed of Rosier’s ability to get at him. But really, James had examined the dead owl, and though he had gone quite pale, he had assured Harry that Rosier had only used an old piece of Dark magic, both to kill it and to get it through the wards. It was one that inspired the owl with a fervor to complete its delivery at any cost and made it draw on its own life-force in order to do so. So it had managed to break through the wards, but it could not possibly have lived long after that.

James had performed the counter-curse, and now all was well; no other owls charmed with the same spell would be able to get through the wards.

Harry could almost feel the Snape in his head fuming that it wasn’t enough. If the wards had one weakness, they could have others. He should be reading the books on wards that Snape had sent. He should be studying ways to outperform any similarly nasty Dark spells the Death Eaters might use on him. He should stop receiving owls altogether. He should leave Lux Aeterna, which was obviously vulnerable to threats, and come live in Hogwarts with Snape, where no Death Eater would be able to enter.

Harry couldn’t do the last two, and he would do the first two. He wrote as much in his letter to Snape, which he sent on its way with Hedwig before the sun was fully over the horizon. He stood in the window of his room, watching her fly, and gnawed her lip. Sometimes he thought it was good that he and Connor had moved into separate rooms—he couldn’t have handled all the owls as easily if they were still sleeping in the same one—but right now, he would have liked to have his brother beside him, so that he could reach out and simply receive a hug.

Then Harry shook his head and turned for the door out of the room.

It was their birthday, or at least the morning of their birthday. And Harry had big things happening today. The meeting with the Malfoys and the Tonks was this morning, the meeting with the northern goblins this afternoon.

There would be time to worry about hugs later.

******

“Happy birthday, Harry, Connor!”

Harry blinked intelligently. He hadn’t expected their father to have presents ready for them when he went to the dining hall table for breakfast. But he did, two gifts wrapped in red silk patterned with gold sunbursts. Harry thought he recognized more of the same kind of cloth that their Midsummer ships’ sails had been made from.

James grinned at him. Harry read the hope in his eyes, and smiled back. He felt a distant pity. James was trying hard, really, to be a good father. He was just poor at it.

Well, giving him extra chances was a small price to pay.

Connor was at the table, grinning at him over a birthday breakfast of sausages and pancakes and Chocolate Frogs. “Dad made me wait until you were up to open my present,” he half-complained at Harry.

Harry gave him a smile, too. In truth, he’d been up for some hours, writing the letter to Snape and reading the books on wards before that arrived, but Connor no longer knew that, as they no longer slept in the same bedroom.

It was odd how unsettled he was by that, really.

I’m just used to sharing a bedroom, Harry dismissed it, and came to sit down in his own spot. He looked out of the corner of his eye, and thought he caught a glimpse of a small, dark cloak as the brownie brought his breakfast. He didn’t stare long, though. The research he’d done in the Potter library said that brownies hated to be scrutinized, or even thanked for their services. The bargain Matilda Potter had made with them was a true bargain, respected on both sides; the family and the brownies owed each other nothing more.

“Well, I’m here now, so you can open it,” he said, with a nod to Connor.
Connor didn’t need further permission, tearing into his gift. He gaped as the red cloth fell away. Harry craned his neck, not quite able to see what it was.

“Wow, Dad,” Connor whispered, as he scooped out the object and held it up for Harry to see. “This is really special.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. It was, indeed. James had got Connor a dueler’s wand—one that was obviously made of holly wood, like his actual wand, and thus modeled after his. A dueler’s wand could be used only in battle or practice for battle, either formal duels or all-out war, and grew acclimated to more and more spells as its wizard cast them. If Connor often used Protego with his dueler’s wand, then the wand would become accustomed to the Shield Charm, and would begin casting it with only half the word out, or even nonverbally, long before Connor would have been able to master such feats of magic with his other wand. It was an honorable weapon and a method of winning, both in one.

“Open your gift, Harry,” Connor urged, snapping out of his reverie.

Harry turned curiously to his gift. He had assumed without thinking about it that James would buy him and Connor the same gifts, or at least similar ones. But he really didn’t need a dueler’s wand, interesting complement though it might make to his own cypress one. He had enough trouble remembering to use his regular wand as it was.

He slid the cloth off, and blinked. He didn’t recognize the object that lay beneath it for a moment, and then it clicked. He held it up and turned it slowly in his hands. It was beautiful, made of copper so old it had acquired a green tinge, and the needle within looked like silver. The N on it was a softly glowing letter that might be made of fairy dust.

“A compass?” he asked.

James did not answer. Harry looked at him, and found his face deadly serious, not the proud but anxious one it had been when he watched Connor hold up the dueler’s wand.

“An alliance compass, Harry,” he said. “It detects both magical power and the friendship that other people feel towards its bearer. I want you to carry it with you. When you’re in danger, it will point towards the nearest person who can help you. Follow the pointer, and it will lead you there by the shortest route possible.” He let out a long, shaking breath. “Merlin knows you need it.”

Harry swallowed. “This came from the Potter treasures, didn’t it?” he asked, turning the compass around in his fingers. He had heard of things like this, but they were always family heirlooms, not the kind of thing that one could buy casually in Diagon Alley.

James nodded. “During the Firestar Wars, a Lord arose. Everyone thought he was a Light Lord at first, but then he turned to Dark magic…or he might even have found a way to combine Light and Dark magic both at once, which no one wants to consider because that’s rather frightening.” His eyes looked past Harry, and Harry could almost picture his father as a young boy, shivering slightly in awe and wonder as he crouched by a storytelling parent’s or grandparent’s chair. “Our ancestor Helen Potter made and used this one. Once it led her on a three-day chase across Northumberland, when the Firestar Lord had cloaked the whole region in an anti-Apparition spell, one that also forbade the use of Portkeys. There was no ally nearer than three days of running away. And he was chasing her himself. He badly wanted her dead.” James returned to himself, and his smile was both proud and sad. “He’d been her betrothed once, you see, the man she was in love with. No one else knew him the way she did. As long as she was alive, then someone might still be able to figure out one of his hidden weaknesses.”

Harry made a mental note to look again at the history books Hermione had brought him. This sounded more fascinating than he had thought they would prove.

And James wasn’t really a poor father, just an inexperienced one.

He closed his hand carefully around the alliance compass. “I’ll carry it at all times, Father. I promise.”

James met his eyes keenly, then smiled and nodded. “Good, Harry.” He glanced at Connor. “Remus said that he’d be waiting for you outside, if you want to duel with him there. I see that you’re mostly finished with breakfast, anyway.”

“Yes!” Connor slipped out of his chair. “I’ll go and see him.” He grabbed Harry in an abrupt hug around the waist, startling him considerably. “You better carry the compass with you all the time,” he whispered in his ear. “You’re in danger.”

Harry blinked and patted his twin’s back. Connor had known that before, of course, but it was gratifying to see him realize it. “Thanks, Connor.”
His brother slipped out of the room, and James took a deep breath. “Eat your breakfast first, Harry,” he said, before Harry could open his mouth.

Harry nodded and dug into his food, watching his father carefully. James obviously wanted to say—something.

“I blocked the spell that Rosier used to send the owl through the wards,” said James, his face long. “That doesn’t mean that he won’t try again. I read his letter, and couldn’t make heads or tails of it. He was always one of the cleverest of the Death Eaters, and I’m not sure what he intends.”

He looked Harry directly in the eye. “That letter brought home to me how much you could die at any time. You’re not safe, Harry, not here at Lux Aeterna and not anywhere else.”

Harry nodded. “I already accept that.”

“But things can be done to keep you safe,” said James. Harry slowed down on forking sausages into his mouth—lately he’d been incredibly hungry—and watched his father warily. He sounded almost manic about this, almost Snape-like. “Thus the alliance compass. Thus the wards. I want you to promise me that you won’t go outside the wards, Harry.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He’d told his father about Narcissa Malfoy’s formal visit this morning, and it was beyond bad manners not to meet with her if she couldn’t come inside Lux Aeterna’s wards; it could endanger his standing among any other pureblood wizards she’d managed to tempt into considering his offers. And the northern goblins had flatly refused to meet him anywhere near Lux Aeterna. The closest they would come was the shore where Harry, Connor, and James had gone for the Midsummer ritual. “I have to.”

“No, you don’t,” said James. “Tell them that you’ll talk to anyone who comes inside the wards, but not otherwise.”

“Not everyone can,” Harry pointed out, clinging to his patience as he felt it slip. He had to do this, didn’t his father see that? Not in the sense of duty or obligation, at least not with the vates work, but with the sense of a moral principle. It pricked him every time he thought about anything else for long. So long as his primary goal was training Connor and helping him heal, Harry could think about something else, but Connor had duels with Remus now, and had reversed even their usual listening positions since his talk with Hermione, insisting on hearing Harry’s side of the fight with Voldemort in the Shrieking Shack. So Harry thought about being a vates and a not-Lord instead. “And I still have to talk to them. It’s an insult not to talk to them.”

“They can get over it,” James insisted.

“Not an insult in the sense of politeness,” said Harry. “An insult to their free will, or an insult to their honor. I don’t want to insult anybody, Dad. We have to have all the wizards I can swing on our side to win this war. And the goblins…they’ve been bound, I know they have, and I want to listen to what they have to tell me.”

James closed his eyes. “I knew Lily trained you to be a soldier,” he said. “I didn’t know she trained you to be a politician, too.”

Harry rose cleanly above the pain that was still there at the sound of his mother’s name. She was nothing to him any more. “Whatever was needed,” he said. “Politics is part of winning this war. I’ve known that since I was five and started learning the histories of the pureblood families and their dances. I’ve got to court them, Dad. You know that.”

James sighed. “Compromise, then. I’ll come with you to any meetings outside the wards.”

Harry winced. “That’ll work for my meeting with Mrs. Malfoy, but not for the goblins. They specifically said I wasn’t to bring anyone else.”

“Why did you agree to meet with them, then?”

“Because I have to,” said Harry. “It’s a great honor that they would trust me enough to meet with me at all, after the way wizards have bound them.”

James tensed, and sat in silent stillness for a long while. Then he nodded. “Fine. But you’ll take a Portkey to the goblin meeting with you.”
“Fair enough.” Harry had been planning to ask for one anyway. In emergencies before, he’d been able to Apparate, but it wasn’t a pleasant experience, or one he looked forward to repeating.

“Let’s go meet with the Malfoys, then,” James said, rising to his feet. Then he gave a faint smile and sat down again. “When you finish your breakfast, of course.”

Harry began hastily swallowing his pancakes.

******

Harry watched as four shapes came into being at the Apparition point, and felt Lux Aeterna’s wards react at once, even though they were outside of them, reaching out to assess the Dark magic that came with the new arrivals. Harry felt their hiss and crackle, and suspected they were spitting at Narcissa Malfoy. It was just as well they’d chosen to meet out here, he thought, on this clean, wide sweep of lawn next to a flowing river the color of malachite, and not try the house’s patience.

Narcissa released Draco, who looked slightly queasy from Side-Along Apparition, but hurried up to Harry and hugged him nonetheless. “Happy birthday, Harry!” he crowed.

Harry smiled and hugged him back, relieved that there was no sign of an ostentatious package. “What did you get me, Draco?” he teased, stepping back and making a show of looking around. He felt James shift at his side, uneasily, but ignored him. The alliance compass was safely tucked into his robe pocket, after all, and his father must know there was no way that Draco’s gift would compete with it.

Draco grinned at him and bounced back to his mother. Narcissa released a Disillusionment Charm on something floating beside her, and a broom came into view. Draco seized it and tugged it triumphantly back towards Harry.

“Oh, no,” Harry said.


Harry reluctantly looked the broom over. He had to admit it was magnificent; the soft hum of magic around it had already told him that. But he felt rather embarrassed. It was a very expensive present. Draco didn’t have to get him this. Harry did love flying, but it wasn’t as though he were mad for Quidditch in the same way Connor was.

Draco had apparently anticipated the entire silent conversation Harry was having with himself. “I wanted to get it for you,” he said. “It’s yours. And it’s charmed so that you’re the only one who can ride it.”

“Draco!” Harry said, startled out of his reverie. “That’s not a good idea! What if we’re in danger and someone else has to ride it, or it has to bear a wounded person?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Think about something other than the war for ten seconds, Harry,” he said crossly, and folded his arms. Harry considered and discarded the idea of telling him he looked like Hermione when he did that. “I bought this for you to have fun, and to have something of your very own to keep. The charms don’t fade or wear off, either,” he added, dashing Harry’s next hope.

“It’s a nice broom,” said Regulus’s voice abruptly in the back of his head. “Take it, for Merlin’s sake.

I thought you were elsewhere, Harry retorted, and reached out reluctantly to take the broom. The moment he touched it, the broom gave a little sound remarkably like a purr, and settled into his grasp. “Thank you, Draco,” he said aloud. “I’m sorry if I sounded ungracious. I was just…startled.”

Did you think I would miss a meeting with my cousins? Regulus hummed to him. And it’s a very nice broom. They didn’t make them like that in my day. Ride it, for Merlin’s sake.

Harry studied Draco’s beaming face, and sighed. I plan to. I just—I just didn’t… He shook his head, unable to express why this made him so uncomfortable.

“Harry.”

Harry was grateful to turn and meet Narcissa’s eyes, inclining his head. At the moment, the prospect of getting his father and Narcissa to be calm around each other was better than the thought of dealing with the emotions that Draco’s gift roused in
him. “Mrs. Malfoy,” he said aloud. “May I present my father, James Potter?”

“We have been formally introduced, once before, long ago,” said Narcissa as she came nearer. She held out one elegant white hand. Her face was the epitome of a pureblooded witch, bland and calm. “I am not sure if your father remembers.”

“I remember,” said James. Harry swung his head to look at his father, startled. He’d never heard his voice sound like that before: tight, restrained, as if he were in the middle of a dance himself. He grasped Narcissa’s hand. “You wore a lovely gown.”

Narcissa’s faint smile flickered around the corner of her mouth. “A Light wizard to the bone,” she murmured. “Absolute truth. I suppose you would keep your mouth shut on my kindness, or lack thereof, that night?”

James raised his brows, but said nothing.

Narcissa stepped away with a faint bow of her head, and turned to Harry. “Harry, may I present my sister, Andromeda Black Tonks, and her daughter, Nymphadora Tonks, who has just completed her training in the Auror program?”

Harry turned to face the two witches who had waited at the Apparition point, his senses on edge now. Was the Ministry going to learn secrets about him from Nymphadora? Was the Order of the Phoenix?

His first sight of Nymphadora rather reassured him, though. She wore the robes, black edged with silver, that a pureblood witch would for a formal meeting, but her hair was purple, also edged with silver, and dazzlingly bright. She came eagerly forward to meet him, and tripped on the hem of her robes. She helped herself back up again, her smile not even faltering, and shook his hand.

“Call me Tonks, Harry,” she said. “Everyone does. I hate Nymphadora. I can’t imagine why some people chose it,” she added, with a glare over her shoulder at her mother, who was approaching much more slowly.

Harry found himself grinning. Well, if she can be informal, so can I. “Let me guess,” he said. “Metamorphmagus? Unless you’re into Muggle dyes.”

“Right the first time!” Tonks said cheerfully, and grew her nose longer in demonstration, for a moment making her face look alarmingly like Snape’s. “I’ve been wanting to meet you for months. You realize you’re the cause of the first non-bitchy letter that my mother’s exchanged with her sister in ten years?”

“Now, Nymphadora,” said Andromeda, who had halted at her left shoulder, entirely properly. “That word is inappropriate. We are sometimes cool and restrained with each other, but we are never…what you said.” She nodded calmly to Harry. She was dark-haired and dark-eyed. Harry would have thought that she looked remarkably like her elder sister Bellatrix Lestrange, but not having a light of crazed madness shining in her eyes did wonders in diminishing the resemblance. “Congratulations, Mr. Potter. I have heard what you did for…certain elements who might otherwise not have found the fire.”

Harry blinked. She was referring to Sirius’s funeral. For some reason, he hadn’t thought Narcissa would tell her sister about that. “Mrs. Tonks,” he said, and held out the hand that Tonks wasn’t holding. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Indeed,” Andromeda murmured, ignoring his hand. “I am obviously not adverse to Muggleborns, since I married one, and I do not use much Dark magic. But, of late, my unease with Dumbledore has been growing. I am glad that you may represent a third side to this war, one that I can comfortably join, without worrying that I am gaining a Lord who will turn on me later.” Her eyes were wide and cool and utterly direct. “My sister said that about you, and I do trust her on that score.”

Harry smiled again. Andromeda was as cutting as Narcissa in her own way, but she didn’t go for the subtle dances, and sometimes that was refreshing, like the slap of the breeze across his face. “I hope to represent one,” he answered. “Until recently, the Boy-Who-Lived was synonymous with Dumbledore, but my brother’s learning better.”

“I was not thinking of the Boy-Who-Lived, but of you,” said Andromeda, stressing the last word more than Harry thought was strictly necessary. “You are the one who impressed my sister and her son.”

Harry sent a sideways glance at Narcissa and Draco. They were both keeping out of this formal introduction, as was proper, but Narcissa had a faint smile on her lips. Draco just looked challenging, as if he wanted Harry to remember the conversation back in June when Draco had first told him he would have to be a leader.

“That’s true, at least,” he said. “But I certainly don’t intend to fight against my brother.”
“No one said anything about that, either,” said Andromeda. “Connor Potter is of no matter to me until and unless he does something more momentous than defeating the Dark Lord as a baby.”

Draco opened his mouth, and Harry just knew he was about to say something unfortunate, such as the truth about the prophecy. He hastily intervened. “Mrs. Tonks, Tonks, this is my father, James Potter.”

“We have met before,” said Andromeda, with a glance that said she didn’t relish the reminder, but she held out her hand. James kissed it with absolute precision.

Tonks didn’t repeat the gesture. Her eyes were wide with wonder. “The James Potter?” she blurted. “The James Potter who brought in the Lestranges? The James Potter who once shielded fourteen Muggle families from the Black Plague spell in one night? You’re him?” She looked all but ready to burst into song. “Somehow I never made the connection! It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir!” She stuck out a hand in what was obviously meant to inspire a shake and not a kiss to her knuckles. “I’ve just finished my Auror training, and you’re one of my heroes.”

James looked horribly uncomfortable as he grasped her hand. Harry thought it was probably the reminder about the Lestranges. “Thank you,” he said. “Sirius used to talk about you. He regretted that he didn’t get to see you more often.”

Tonks smiled at him. “He was the only one who didn’t call me Nymphadora when I was a kid,” she said. “Even in letters. Yeah, I liked him. I’m so sorry he’s gone.”

James blinked. “I should be the one saying that to you, Miss Tonks.”

Tonks shook her head. “I liked him, but I didn’t really know him,” she said. “He was your best friend. I’m sorry you lost him.”

James had to look away from her. Harry blinked. Tonks was doing better than he could have in a similar situation, even though she’d referenced Sirius. He hoped that was a good indication of things to come.

Then he looked at Narcissa, whose face was aloof, and Andromeda, who simply looked blank, and sighed. It wasn’t going to be easy.

But he didn’t intend to give up either his blood father or his best friend and his relatives, and the sooner that both sides understood that, the better.

“Mr. Potter?”

Harry looked back at Andromeda, glad of the question. Hopefully, whatever she asked of him would distract attention from the confrontation that felt as if it were going to happen, what with having both Malfoys and Potters in the same place.

“Can you show me your magic?” Andromeda asked. “Lower all your shields and show me the full strength? I have heard that your displays in the past were rather impressive, but I have not felt them myself.”

Harry read the hidden message in her voice. She wanted to trust him, but she had no particular reason to do so, not until she saw some actual evidence of power from him. Narcissa had been the one who had observed or told her everything so far, and she wanted some granite proof.

Harry nodded, then closed his eyes and lowered his shields.

He felt his magic swell around him and then flood out, singing, across Lux Aeterna’s lawn. It was under much better control than when he’d released it at the Quidditch game back in November, or from the Owlery at the vernal equinox. He could command it to rise up around him and hover, not overwhelming anyone, but not letting anyone who watched doubt its depth, either.

He opened his eyes. He saw the world through a shimmering haze of golden-white light, which didn’t surprise him, as he was feeling calm at the moment. He was surprised by the expressions on the faces around him.

Draco grinned smugly. Come to that, Narcissa wasn’t far from a smug grin herself. James had a combination of a proud and worried look on his face, tilting towards the worried.
Tonks held out a hand, as though she could feel the solid force of the magic in the air itself, and grinned at Harry. "Wicked," she said.

Andromeda slowly closed her eyes. Harry had no idea what she was thinking as she stood there, apparently soaking in the magic.

Then she opened her eyes and whispered, “It will serve. It will more than serve. If you can avoid becoming a Lord, you will be greater than any wizard this world has seen for more than thirty generations.”

Harry blinked, wondering why she’d picked the number thirty generations, and then reminded himself that his magic had been out of bounds a bit too long. Tonks and Draco were both beginning to get dreamy expressions on their faces. He had enough of a problem with his magic sometimes flooding out of the boundaries of his own mind and changing people when he didn’t know about it. What it could do when completely free resembled one of the better healing potions.

He gently caged his power again, and met Andromeda’s eyes. “I’m interested in defeating Voldemort, in freeing the magical creatures, and in helping those who will agree to settle problems,” he said. “Not in—well, in becoming a Lord, or doing what Dumbledore has done.”

“The power is always a temptation,” Andromeda whispered. She sounded like a worshipper in a church. “To turn to compulsion. That is what felled so many of the Lords in the past, Lords who could have been great.”

“I hope to avoid that trap,” said Harry. “I want to be a vates, if you’re familiar with the word. I’m doing what I can to control my magic and my unconscious compulsive abilities both. I don’t know if I’ll succeed, but I want to.”

Andromeda smiled. “Yes,” she said. “I believe you will. And I believe that I am willing to become your formal ally.” She added, without even looking away from Harry, “Stop grinning, Narcissa.”

Harry grinned slightly, himself, and turned to glance at his father. James was giving him an unfathomable stare.

Hopefully, he’ll think I’m safe when I go off to meet the goblins this afternoon, Harry thought. And he’ll get along with the Malfoys and the Tonks after all. This is going rather well.

It is, Regulus agreed happily from the back of his head. Whoever thought my cousins could be sterling examples of good sense when they wanted to be? In both choice of allies and choice of brooms?

******

Harry felt the difference the moment the whirl of the Portkey let him go and he found himself facing that same beach from which they’d launched their tiny ships. The same beach, yes, but this was later in the summer, without the gentle magic of the solstice to cushion the place. This time, it felt utterly wild, and Harry could hear the magic panting in each roar of the ocean up its beach.

More to the point, there was sharp power in the air, not really wizarding. Harry sniffed once or twice, and glanced straight ahead of him.

White fire, the same color as the sparks that had fallen from the messenger gulls’ feathers each time they had come to him, burned ahead of him. Harry took a deep breath and started walking. He had been able to find only contradictory information in A Practical History of Goblins in the North about what one should wear when meeting with the northern clans, and he suspected none of it would be appropriate for a vates wizard meeting with goblins anyway, so he’d chosen to wear simple shirt and trousers and let it go at that.

As he came nearer, the white fire divided into four, the spikes leaping out from a central point to start the fires burning in the midst of rocky nests. Harry still didn’t know what caused or fed the fire. Of course, house elves had unique magic, too, and centaurs.

From between the fires, or behind them, or somewhere around them, came the goblins. Each fire had four goblins at it. Four each for the clans of Seadampin, Waterrune, Ternretten and Stonecantor, Harry thought. He didn’t know how to tell one clan from the others, so he simply halted at an equal distance between the fires and waited.

One goblin stepped forward from the nearest set of flames. “Harry James Potter?” His voice was a croaking, grating slide, uglier and harsher than the voices of goblins Harry had heard in Diagon Alley when he went to buy school supplies.
Harry inclined his head.

“I am Helcas Seadampin.”

Harry nodded, having expected this. The other goblins were hanging back, and one thing that *A Practical History of Goblins in the North* had indeed been good for was detailing what happened when multiple allied clans met with a representative of some outside interest. They inevitably deferred to the most powerful goblin present to speak for them. Griphook Fishbaggin, who had written the book, speculated that their deference to him was rather like the deference of wizards to a Lord.

If what Harry suspected was true, that was exactly backwards, but he would probably learn the truth in a few minutes.

“You are rather silent, for a wizard and a *vates*,” said Helcas, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“I did not wish to give offense,” said Harry. “I couldn’t find much about your people in any book, and I don’t know much of the etiquette.”

Helcas had a wild laugh, he thought. From the sea, a gull screamed in response. “We have made sure that wizards cannot understand us from books,” he said. “It forces them to come deal with us. We only trusted one wizard to write down the truth, and he got many things wrong.”

“Griphook Fishbaggin,” Harry whispered.

“Yes.” Helcas cocked his head. “We adopted him, and he was a coward and a traitor in the end. Why were you willing to meet with us?”

Helcas had stepped away from the fire now, and Harry could see him without his eyes dazzling him with purple afterimages. Helcas was taller than the southern goblins he had met before, with skin as gray as the water. His hands bore twisted dark claws, and though Harry glimpsed them clearly only once, he thought Helcas had six fingers on either. Helcas’s face was dominated by his mouth, rich with teeth. Harry was surprised that he could speak English as well as he could, with all those fangs pressing on his tongue.

*Be careful*, Regulus whispered abruptly in his head.

Harry had had much practice in the last few days concealing his jolt whenever that voice suddenly spoke, as well as his instinctive urge to respond with a nod or a shake of his head. *I will be*, he whispered back, and focused on the goblin. “Because I became aware of the webs on all magical creatures recently,” he answered. “I think that everyone else should be as free as possible.”

Helcas laughed softly. “Wizards have said things like that to us before.”

Harry suppressed a shrug. “I’m not those wizards,” he said.

Helcas eyed him in silence for a long moment. Then he said, “Griphook Fishbaggin was a coward and a traitor. We took him in, and showed him the truth, and he ran away from it. He said that we must be mistaken, and he wrote his book to show us as poor slaves looking for a leader for our rebellion. Do you know why that is wrong?”

Harry nodded. He’d had the idea after reading *A Practical History of Goblins in the North* again. It was the book that Connor had originally got the idea that compulsion was good from, after reading that the goblins apparently wanted a wizard leader who could compel them. “Someone who opens doors is not the same as a ruler,” he said. “And because a wizard is uncomfortable with what you show him doesn’t mean you’re lying.”

“I like you better than him already,” said Helcas. Abruptly, he took a few steps forward and closed one clawed hand on Harry’s left wrist, squeezing.

Harry began to breathe as his mother had taught him, retreating before the pain, rolling under it when he couldn’t retreat, letting it find but not conquer him. It grew in intensity until he thought his bones might grind into mush, but if they did, then, well, he had the resources to heal himself, either here or at Lux Aeterna. He was certainly not about to strike at the goblins.

“Why aren’t you defending yourself?” Helcas whispered. “Can we ask someone for help who won’t defend himself?”
“When I think you’re going to kill me,” Harry whispered back, fighting not to sag to his knees, “then I’ll strike.”

Helcas laughed like a gull again, wild and near and overwhelmingly loud, and released his wrist. Harry massaged it as the blood rushed back into his hand. He saw no need to pretend that it hadn’t hurt. It had, and just like screaming under torture, the acknowledgment could make him hurt less. His pride mattered infinitely less than his life did.

“Patience,” said Helcas. “Honesty. Those are good qualities. But they are not the only ones a vates must have.” He turned and snapped his claws together in a complicated pattern, too quick for Harry’s eyes to follow. One of the other goblins hastened forward, holding an earthenware bottle in his hands.

Helcas picked up the bottle and turned to meet Harry’s eyes. “The others follow me because I know what must be done,” he said. “We might ask you to look, but no human can see with goblin eyes, unless they are granted to him.” He held out the bottle. Harry heard it slosh, and knew it was full of some liquid.

Harry raised his brows. If the other tests had been of patience and honesty, this one was a test of courage.

And stupidity, Regulus snarled. I don’t like this. I don’t trust goblins, and I don’t trust this beach. Something is strange about it.

Of course there is, Harry thought back, even as he accepted the bottle. There is goblin magic in the air.

More than that.

But Regulus didn’t say anything else, certainly not to tell him what was strange, so Harry sniffed at the potion. He recognized the scent of seaweed, and nothing else. The potion was thick, green, the color of the river that ran near Lux Aeterna, but it shifted and became gray and brown as he watched.

The colors of Northumberland, Harry thought, as he tipped the bottle off. The colors of the county my father was born in. They won’t hurt me.

It was like drinking thick, sandy water. It spilled down his throat and nearly choked him. Harry grimaced and kept swallowing, not allowing any of the vestiges of the liquid to roll out of the corners of his mouth, even though it was tempting. He had to get it all down.

The liquid brewed and churned in his stomach, and then Harry coughed in surprise. The potion itself had been cold, but a burning line seemed to be rising up his throat.

He raised his eyes, and saw the same burning engulf the air in front of him. Dancing white fires were everywhere he looked, not only in the nests of rocks that the goblin clans had made. In fact, those flames became the dimmest as the whole world burned. Harry could see white fire consuming the air, and revealing another world behind the surface one, rather like the one he had traveled with Fawkes.

This one glittered as a vast, empty waste of air above, and, beneath Harry’s feet, endless reaches of stone and soil and metal. Harry blinked. He turned his head to the sea, and realized he was seeing the currents that pulsed within it, the veins of salt and warm and cold that made it so different from the land.

“Now,” whispered Helcas, taking his shoulder, “turn and look behind you.”

Harry did, and recoiled. He could clearly see the goblins’ net now, a vast and dirty thing, the web of an old and savage spider, spreading out to the south. As he watched, it reared into one sharply defined peak of foulness very close at hand, and then went on running, linking to other places, lone mountains of filth in the midst of cleanliness. Harry shivered in revulsion.

“What are they?” he whispered.

“The stakes of our net,” Helcas whispered back, his mouth very close to Harry’s ear. “The pins that hold us down, running into the sweet earth itself, making us unable to simply free ourselves. The linchpins.”

Harry understood, then. The nearest mountain of foulness was Lux Aeterna.

“Why did they bind you?” he breathed.
“Why do wizards bind any magical creature?” Helcas sounded old and cross and tired. “Because they wanted things from us. Because they were afraid we might hurt them. Because they didn’t want to hear the truth. In our case, they wanted us to mine.

“But that wasn’t all of it. We told them, when they first tried to establish their linchpins, what it would do to the land they established them in. They sink so deep that they pierce the soil. The earth can’t move and shift around them the way it would naturally.” Helcas motioned with his head in the direction of the beach, though Harry saw that only from the corner of his eye. The black, smoking volcano of Lux Aeterna in this realm of sight still occupied most of his attention. “If all was as it should be, the sea would have eaten this beach long ago, and the land where Lux Aeterna stands would have sunk, and hills would have arisen in other places.”

Harry wanted to close his eyes, hide his face, turn away. He did not. “And the only way to free you is to destroy the linchpins?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Helcas. “All of them. If even one is left, then it will enslave us, and prevent the net from being pulled up.”

“You do realize,” said Harry, startled to hear his own voice so dry, “that it’s less than ideal to ask a Potter, one of the heirs of the nearest linchpin, to destroy his own home?”

“Less than ideal,” said Helcas. “Immediately? Impossible. But you are the vates. We have hope now, where we had none before. You can take your time, vates. But eventually, we expect that you will destroy the linchpins, yes. Your own ideals are stronger than the wizarding world’s.”

Harry tried to think of how many grand old homes he would be destroying, how many pureblood families he would anger, and shook his head. It was too much to contemplate for right now.

But he was not running. He was not turning away.

“I understand,” he said, and then blinked. White flames were crawling back over the world, dimming his sight of the earth and the sea and the slag mountains. He waited until his eyes were normal again, then stepped away from Helcas and turned to look at him.

Helcas studied him intently. His eyes were a thick yellow-green, Harry saw, the color of dead seaweed. “Patience, honesty, courage,” he said. “One more remains.”

He turned and gestured at one of the fires arrayed behind him and off to the left. Harry didn’t know which clan it was, but one of the members stepped forward and tossed Helcas a small object. Helcas felt at it for a moment, then turned and handed it to Harry.

Harry found a small, spiky stone, star-shaped, with one spike on either side and one on top and bottom. He looked at Helcas. “Well?”

“Tell us all the things that you could do with this,” Helcas said.

Harry frowned and looked at the stone. “I could toss it behind me if someone was chasing me and try to stab them in the foot, I suppose,” he said. “It’d be good for horses’ hooves—well, not good, but it would slow them down. I could throw it at someone else’s head and distract them that way, if not actually hit them. I could hold it in my hand and stab it into an enemy’s eye.”

He tossed the stone, and watched as it sparkled when it soared. Faint veins of silver were probably the cause, he saw, when the stone landed in his palm again. “I could use it as a signal, throwing back the sun, if a friend were close enough. I could use it in a game; it’s weighted enough to make a good playing piece. I could use it as the base of several potions, but I’d have to know if the black stone was basalt or onyx or something else first.” He grimaced. His studies in stones weren’t going as well as he wanted them to, but then, it was hard splitting his attention between all the subjects he wanted to study. He didn’t have Hermione’s ability to do so effectively.

“And I could use it as a token of friendship—“

He started as Helcas grabbed the stone back out of his hand. Harry looked at him curiously. “What’s the matter?”

“You named eight uses,” said Helcas, folding the stone back into his palm. Harry winced, but either the goblin didn’t feel the spikes cutting into his hand the way Harry would have, or he was unwilling to show pain. “Two for each clan. The final test
was one of intelligence.”

He stared hard at Harry. “We shall be here, vates, when you feel the need to set us upon the path of freedom at last. We shall send you messages through any storm of danger. We shall tell you the truth, always. And we shall come up with clever plans where others could not.”

One correspondence to each virtue they’d tested him on, Harry guessed. He nodded. “Then I suppose our meeting is over?”

“As soon as you tell us why you have brought other wizards along,” Helcas said.

“I didn’t.” Harry immediately thought of Connor’s Invisibility Cloak, though, and felt a welling of unease. Did someone follow me out of sight?

“Then explain that,” said Helcas, and nodded over his shoulder. Harry turned.

Four black figures were behind him.

Death Eaters! Regulus screamed abruptly in his head. I can feel their connections to Voldemort.

Harry heard wild, immediately recognizable laughter in the same instant, and then the Portkey in his pocket began to burn. He snatched it out and threw it, not letting himself think about it, and watched as it was destroyed, a small sparkle in the air, consuming itself in a burst of fire. Anti-Apparition spells were already up, slamming into place around him and holding him like a fly in amber.

And then the goblins whirled aside, and Bellatrix Lestrange’s first hex came at him, and he had no time for anything other than battle.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Four: Battles In Conversation

Harry felt his shoulder all but crunch on the sand as he avoided Bellatrix’s first hex. He felt his heart hammering in his ears, heard his own gasping, and felt an ache travel across his sides that might have been the remnant of the bruises he’d earned from Voldemort’s justice ritual, were those not healed long since.

He felt all that, but his attention was on the mental world, interpreting the Death Eaters’ movements and the repertoire of spells they were likely to use in this situation and the urgent murmurs that Regulus was handing him.

Rabastan—that must be Rabastan with her, from the way he moves—has a weak left side. Strike him there. The one on the very end is Mulciber. Watch out for his Imperius.

That I knew, said Harry, and heard Bellatrix cry out, predictably, “Crucio!”

Of course she would do that, Harry thought, as he raised his Shield Charm around himself without pausing to breathe out the incantation. She liked to hurt people, and he had killed both her husband and her Lord. He wasn’t surprised that she had sought him out for vengeance.

Mind, he would have liked to know how she’d found him.

But when he thought about that, as the Unforgivable bounced from his shield and a hex from Mulciber followed it, he knew. There was only one possible candidate for a guidepost. He’d released his magic, at Andromeda’s asking, and it would have lit up the sky like a second sun to anyone looking for it.

Merlin take it, he thought in resignation. That was dangerous. Although how I could have refused when she’d asked me to do so, without insulting her...

His Shield Charm cracked apart under a persistent hex from the Death Eater on the far right, and Harry jerked his mind back to the battle. He had every chance of surviving this, but not if he nattered on to himself.

Who’s that? he asked Regulus as he cast a full body-bind at the one whom Regulus had identified as Rabastan. The man stiffened and toppled over, but Mulciber was already turning to revive him.
Rosier, said Regulus flatly.

Rosier cast back his hood in the next moment, and confirmed Regulus’s statement. He was the same dark-eyed, handsome, smiling man Harry had glimpsed on the night he slew Rodolphus. His gaze was fixed on Harry now, and he spoke a few words, his voice unexpectedly loud in that little pause between the firing of spells. Harry could even hear him over the pounding of his heart.

“How dull it is to pause, to make an end,” he said, “to rust unburnished, not to shine in use! As thou' to breathe were life.” He raised his wand and sent a blue hex at Harry that he didn’t recognize. He summoned his own magic, figuring there wasn’t much use hiding it now, and grabbed the hex in midair, flinging it back at Rosier. The Death Eater dodged it easily, and his voice only grew more assured. “Life piled on life were all too little, and of one to me little remains.”

“Shut up, Evan,” Bellatrix Lestrange snapped at him, and then turned and snarled at Harry, her long black hair flying free around her face. “You’re going to die, baby,” she said, her voice unexpectedly conversational. “I hope that you like potatoes. Before you die, I’ll make you peel them, and then cut off your fingers, and serve to you a stew full of potatoes and fingers stripped to the bone.”

Harry shuddered in spite of himself, but decided that he might as well do something with all this time his enemies were giving him as they chattered. He gestured with his hand at Rabastan’s right side and murmured, loud enough to be heard, “Incendio.”

A fire started in the grass at Rabastan’s feet, making him lunge to the left. Harry aimed at his ribs.

“There’s a good spot, said Regulus helpfully.

“Reducto!” Harry snapped, and Rabastan went spinning and slumping, gasping and wheezing aloud. Harry heard several ribs snap clear across the grass.

“Oh, you’ll pay for that, baby,” Bellatrix whispered, and there was no warning of a word this time as she sent the Cruciatus at him again. Harry dropped flat. He didn’t dare let the curse catch him.

“You have no sense of adventure, Bellatrix,” said Rosier, as if continuing a conversation they hadn’t finished, and pointed his wand slightly to the side of Harry. “But every hour is saved from that eternal silence, something more, a bringer of new things.” He fired a hex.

Harry couldn’t understand why it was going to travel past him, at first. Then he remembered the goblins, who had remained still and silent behind him, but apparently not fled.

He jumped into its path, spitting, “Haurio!” The jade-green shield formed in his palm and drank the magic. Harry was reminded that he could, himself, drink magic if he wished, and add some of Rosier’s power to his own. He shook off the temptation. He would either be trying to swallow and incorporate it fully into his own magic in the middle of battle, or he would be slinging around raw and uncoordinated power, and that had not worked well in the past.

He felt a stirring at his back. He kept his eyes forward, though he wove another Shield Charm just above his skin. If Helcas was on the Death Eaters’ side, there was nothing Harry could do about that.

Instead, Helcas said, “He stood to defend us. Gralashigan!”

A storm of white, glinting shapes flew past Harry, and Mulciber gave a shriek. Harry spun to face him, and saw him tugging at two bone-white arrows, one of them embedded in his shoulder and another in his arm. Rosier and Bellatrix had been quick enough to raise shields against them, and Rabastan still lay motionless on the ground.

Harry smiled slightly. It appeared that the goblins were on no side in a wizarding war, unless those wizards actually fought for them.

Rosier threw back his head and laughed. He looked more mad than Harry had thought he was, this close, with his eyes glinting and his voice whispering out the words of a poem that Harry still did not recognize.

“Death closes all: but something ere the end,” he said, bowing to Harry and flourishing his wand, “some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.” His voice dipped into a more normal register. “I think that we
are very close to striving with a god now. *Accendo intra cruore!*"

Harry felt the spell begin within his shields, something that was supposed to be impossible. A moment later, he cried out as his blood began to boil in his veins. He could actually hear his flesh cooking as it flashed and burned, or at least he thought he could.

*Hold steady, Harry!* Regulus was shouting at him. *Unleash that magic-feeding ability you have and turn it on yourself! You can do this. Eat up his spell! Consume into you and make it harmless!*

Harry forced himself to listen. What Regulus said made good sense. He would listen. He had to listen. He forced his breathing flat and rolled around the pain, never mind that it was more intense than anything he had ever felt, never mind that he could imagine the fire broiling his liver and his heart. He had to do this, and it was to be done, and he was doing it—

And it was done. Harry felt the fire retreat as his ability hungrily swallowed the curse making its way through his body. It left pain vibrating in him, still, and he wanted nothing so much as he wanted to collapse to the ground and cry, but he could think and feel and function again.

And given the ability that was flooding around him, and the fact that he could have nearly died and so cost Connor and the goblins and Draco and Snape and many other people someone who might matter to them, Harry let go of the hold on his temper.

He fixed his eyes on Rosier, who was cocking his head, not looking really surprised that Harry had survived.

“Tennyson,” he explained, when he saw Harry staring at him. “His father was a wizard. Real father, that is. His mother never told anyone about a certain visitor to her bed one night, but I found the letter she wrote, begging her ‘demon lover’ to come back. I would never quote the words of a simple Muggle, of course.”

Harry didn’t bother replying, but simply gestured. Around him, the snake of his ability opened its jaws wide.

Mulciber shrieked like a girl, probably because Harry would have swallowed the healing spells he was working on the arrows first. And then Harry felt his magic tearing hungrily at the actual magic of the Death Eaters, eating it and chewing on it, and feeding it to Harry as if down a siphon.

This time, Harry was better braced for the rush of insane strength that came to him, and he knew how he wanted to use it. He concentrated, hard, and glittering blue walls sprang into being behind Rosier and Bellatrix. Those would prevent them from moving, by any means, even Portkey or Apparition.

Bellatrix snapped something out of the front of her robe in response, and cast it to the ground in the moment before the blue walls curled around her and completely restricted her movement. Harry saw a familiar black flash.

“Attack,” Bellatrix whispered. “As I am of the Black blood, attack.”

The creature, a centipede with a multilegged and multi-jointed body, scurried forward and through Harry’s blue cage walls as if they weren’t there. Harry focused his ability on it and started to drain it, but his magic rolled off its own with no effect.

They can’t be touched by anyone not of the House of Black, Regulus snarled, in any way. But I can do something about this. How dare she steal our family’s treasures, when she’s not the rightful heir? Open your mouth, Harry.

Harry opened it, trusting him, and spoke in a voice that was not his own. “Back, as I am Black’s heir.”

The centipede stopped. Harry watched its body sway, blinking now and then as his own body swelled with power. He occupied it in building shields around the goblins, just to make sure that Mulciber and Rabastan, if they recovered, couldn’t strike at them.


“I think not,” said Regulus’s same smooth, self-assured voice, sounding much calmer than it ever was when he shouted in Harry’s head. “*Toujours pur* abstained.”

The centipede abruptly self-destructed, rather like Harry’s Portkey had, flipping over and ripping itself to shreds. Harry blinked at the gleaming black joints and legs left behind, then lifted his head and met Bellatrix Lestrange’s eyes.
“Who are you?” she whispered.

“Someone who wasn’t as dead as you thought, Bellatrix,” Regulus said through Harry’s mouth. It was rather an odd experience, Harry thought, even as more magic flooded him and he sent more into the shields surrounding the goblins. “And I see now that you’ve been hiding in one of the family’s estates. No wonder the Aurors couldn’t find you. I shall make sure to remedy that. I may not have my body back yet, but I have my voice, and my will, and I am the rightful heir of the Black line. From now on, any doors that have opened in our houses because of your bloodline are closed to you, and to those who travel with you.”

Bellatrix let out a long, descending scream. Harry caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned swiftly.

Rabastan was writhing slowly. He placed a hand on his left arm, probably above the Dark Mark, and whispered something Harry couldn’t make out.

Harry felt the sucking pull of some immense, stirring magic, as perverted as that which Voldemort had unleashed in the Shrieking Shack. He instinctively coiled his ability back about his body, not wanting to swallow any of the foul power now blasting from Rabastan.

In an instant, the anti-Apparition spells the Death Eaters had established were gone, and his shields and cages, without the feeding of new magic to hold them, were melting. Harry fell back a step and prepared for battle.

But Bellatrix obviously knew when she was beaten, and Apparated out. Mulciber and Rabastan followed her a moment later. Rosier lingered, smiling faintly at Harry.

“You’ll want to get to a healer soon,” he said. “My Accendo intra cruore—” Harry tensed, but the spell didn’t repeat itself “—can leave a lot of internal damage. Why, I’ve known people who went mad in St. Mungo’s, trying to reverse it.” He tilted his head to the side and clucked his tongue. “Or was that the people who went mad trying to heal from the pain? I can never remember.”

And then he was gone.

Harry sagged to his knees, breathing hard. He felt Regulus retreat into the back of his head, apparently looking at something not visible to Harry, and then murmur, He’s right. And I can feel someone else with a connection to Voldemort coming.

Harry struggled to his feet, then sat down hard on the sand again. His body was reeling from the sudden reversal of magic, and he could feel the first pain coming back again, like the first rise of a long tide at sea. He’d just had his veins cooked from the inside out. He had no idea how much damage had been done, or what had to be done to reverse it, or how much agony he was going to be in in a short while.

A clawed hand caught his elbow. Harry looked up, through eyes already going glassy, and met Helcas’s gaze.

“We are your allies now,” said Helcas. “Formally. You defended us. That is not something many wizards, even one who claimed to be vates, would do.” His gaze went abruptly over Harry’s head. “We will protect you from those who might come to hurt you, even him.”

Harry turned his head wearily to look. Yes, the pain was rising, but he had to remain conscious and sane for just a little longer.

He didn’t need his usual wits to recognize the figure coming at a dead run across the sands, though. Snape.

Probably Harry’s blast of magic had called him, he thought, or perhaps whatever Rabastan had done with the Dark Mark. Harry closed his eyes and sighed. He was glad that Snape was here. He concentrated on remaining conscious, so that he could tell Snape what had happened.

Snape slid to a stop beside him, not even appearing to notice the goblins. Helcas made a motion, but Harry managed to whisper, “He’s a friend,” and the goblin stopped.

“Harry!”
Harry couldn’t even tell which emotion was predominant in that cry, it held so many. He forced his eyes open, and met Snape’s gaze calmly.

“Rosier used *Accendo intra cruore* on me,” he said, and then the pain grabbed him and dragged him out to sea. Harry felt himself falling through darkness, with sounds that might be the cries of gulls or the laughter of goblins in his ears.

Snape might have glared at the goblins ordinarily. He might have demanded that Harry keep awake and help him with a little more information about what Rosier had done to him, if he could. He might have suffered a surge of rage about what Harry was doing out here alone, with no one to protect him.

He might have done that, if he hadn’t heard the name of the spell that Harry had suffered, and seen the telltale black traces already spreading beneath Harry’s skin.

Snape grabbed Harry close and shut his eyes. He let his desperation build, his pain, his resolve, and used them to call up a picture of a place he hadn’t been in months.

Together, he and Harry Apparated, and he felt the world around him squeeze and tingle unpleasantly the way it always did when he performed Side-Along Apparition. Or Chest-Along Apparition, as it was in this case, Snape thought, as he came out very firmly on the floor of his potions lab at Spinner’s End.

He laid Harry down on a stone bench that he usually kept for potions that needed a flat surface, and moved towards the shelves. He had potions here that could fight the Blood-Burning Curse, potions that he didn’t have at Hogwarts and doubted they would have at St. Mungo’s. He could save Harry’s life. He would move fast enough to do so.

He used those thoughts like iron spikes, hammering them into the yammering, yelping, confused mass of his panic, holding it steady. His hands did not shake as he found the proper mixture of potions and poured them into a vial. The mortar and pestle moved in fine, precise strokes as he crushed a small measure of violet petals and likewise emptied them into the mixture of the potions. He did not spin and slosh the brew wildly all over the room; he turned, with no more than a small flourish of his robes, and strode back to Harry.

He pried Harry’s jaws apart and emptied the mixture down his throat. He saw the blackness begin to retreat along the path of his veins almost immediately. Harry gave a little shivering sigh and relaxed.

Snape Transfigured a cauldron into a chair and sat down on it, hard, across from Harry.

Then, then, he allowed himself to put his hands over his face, and shake, from affection and pain and fury and the panic of such a near miss. If he had not been there, Harry would have died—perhaps not for days, perhaps in as little as two minutes. The Blood-Burning Curse did immense damage, contingent on how long it was held and how much the caster wanted to hurt the victim, and Snape had no information on what Rosier’s intentions might have been.

*Evan Rosier. I wish the Dementors were still at Azkaban, if only so they might contain and cage him.*

Snape had thought for the past fourteen years that Rosier was dead, and even though the man had died before he officially abandoned his loyalty to Voldemort, he had been relieved. There was something wild in Rosier, something even more untrustworthy than Bellatrix’s unrelenting sadism, something that made him civilized in one moment and then longing for pain and death in the next. He had invented the Blood-Burning Curse, and used it, often so lingeringly that the sufferers had felt their blood slowly boiling away for days. Snape doubted that fourteen years in Azkaban would have improved him.

And Harry had faced him alone—alone. That he had had goblins with him did not matter; goblins would not often fight for wizards. And by the position of the boy’s body, he’d been protecting them, not the other way around.

Snape could guess how the Death Eaters had found Harry, too. He himself had felt the beacon rise this morning, the siren song of a magic wild and seductive and alluring, and had identified Lux Aeterna in a few moments. He’d had to control the temptation to Apparate there and snatch Harry away.

Then he’d felt another blast of magic this afternoon, and his Dark Mark had burned the way it did when one of the Death Eaters was using Voldemort’s “gift” to befoul all the magic in the area, and he’d Apparated towards both calls without waiting.
And if he had not, Harry would be dead.

Snape slowly dropped his hands from his face and checked on Harry. The boy had uncurled from the tight, almost fetal, position he’d adopted on the way here. The black traces were gone from his hands and his right arm, and had retreated most of the way towards his heart on his left arm. Snape knew the signs. The Curse was dissipating. The few times he’d used this mixture of potions on other Death Eaters whom Rosier had cursed and the Dark Lord had ordered him to heal, the effect had been the same.

Harry was going to live.

But he so nearly had not.

Snape allowed the rage to wake up in him then. This wasn’t the wild emotion he had felt when he thought Harry was still in danger. This was the familiar rage associated with James Potter and Sirius Black, the cold, dark hatred that stalked Snape’s veins like a chill version of the Accendo intra cruo.

James Potter could not take care of him. He let his son go to meet goblins, alone, after flourishing his magic like a banner outside the wards.

Does he care about Harry at all?

And does he really think that I will let him take Harry back?

He should contact the man fairly soon, Snape considered. Reassure him that Harry was all right, that he hadn’t been abducted by Death Eaters. And of course a letter to Draco would not go amiss.

On the other hand, there might be Death Eaters watching Spinner’s End, waiting to intercept any owls. Snape really had no way of knowing. He hadn’t been here since last summer, and would not have risked coming here now, if not for the potions he’d needed. He should get back behind Hogwarts’s wards as soon as possible. The Death Eaters knew his affiliation with the Light, and were hunting him now.

And letters can wait until Harry is safe, he decided, and gathered the sleeping boy up again. This time, he felt almost calm as he Apparated to Hogsmeade. He could actually afford to land outside Hogwarts’s anti-Apparition spells, and walk in, without fearing that Harry would die along the way.

He did not feel calm, however, because the rage was waiting under the surface.

I am the only one who can properly protect him. I knew it all along, and still I let him leave. Not this time. Not again. No matter what anyone says.

******

Harry woke slowly. He knew that he wasn’t at home, as much from the feel of the magic around him as because the sheets didn’t fold like his own. He blinked and wiped at his face, and found that he had no glasses. A quick glance located them on the bedside table, and from the thick stone walls around him, he guessed he was at Hogwarts.

His broken memories traced themselves back to darkness, and pain, and Professor Snape crouched over him—

“Feeling better, Harry?”

And here came Professor Snape now, swooping through the door of the room like a huge black version of the gulls on the Northumberland shore. Harry nodded hesitantly at him; he couldn’t see his expression that well without his glasses. “Fine, thank you, sir, although I’m still weak,” he said. He hesitated, then added, “You probably saved my life.”

For a moment, Snape stilled, and Harry wondered what emotions the words roused, how close he had come to death. Then Snape said, in an almost neutral voice, “Yes, I did. And now you are in a private room that I have furnished for your convenience, linked to mine with a magical door. The loo is to your right, and there is a small library beyond this door, already stocked with books, that you may peruse when you are feeling better.” Snape came close enough for Harry to make out his expression this time, and added, “I am certain you would go mad if you were left without something to do.”
Harry nodded. “Yes, I would, sir.” He was uneasy. Something was wrong. He had been certain that Snape would come in raging about the carelessness of parents in general and James Potter in particular, how his father wasn’t fit to care for his own sons, how Harry would have been better off with Fenrir Greyback, and how obviously neither Remus Lupin nor his brother could be trusted to have heads on their shoulders, either. Instead, Snape watched him with intent but not agitated eyes, and seemed to be waiting for a first sally from Harry, instead of a response.

Harry finally coughed and said, “Were the goblins fine, sir?”

“They were,” said Snape. “None of them were injured that I saw. Granted, my first priority was not injured goblins.”

Ah, the first hint of sharpness in his voice. Harry relaxed at hearing it. He would rather deal with an angry, and thus familiar, Snape than the calm stranger who’d come striding into the room. “Then they probably weren’t at all,” he said. “I did pour some of my magic into shields to defend them.” He paused again, and still Snape stood silent. Harry fidgeted with the blankets. Isn’t he even going to scold me?

Abruptly, a new thought struck him. Did something horrible happen to someone else, and he doesn’t want to tell me?

He stared at Snape, who immediately came over to sit down on a chair beside the bed. “What is it, Harry?”

“What about James and Connor and Remus?” Harry whispered. “Was there a— a disaster at Lux Aeterna? Did the Death Eaters get them?” His mind jumped to people who wouldn’t have been in the vicinity of either Rosier or Bellatrix next. “What about Draco? Narcissa? One of the other Slytherins? I—“

Snape caught his wrist and held it, firmly enough that Harry couldn’t pick at the blankets any more, or scratch at his scar, as he’d half-raised his hand to do. “No one suffered, Harry,” he said. “No one but Death Eaters, who doubtless deserved it, and you. And that is why you are going to be staying with me for the rest of the summer.”

Harry let out a relieved breath, and then his mind caught up with his ears. That’s why he’s so calm, he realized, as he studied Snape again. He’s acting as though this is already settled.

Of course, it wasn’t. Harry was damn well going to fight it. What unnerved him wasn’t Snape’s mask—he would probably have tried to look composed in the face of Voldemort returned—but how genuine it seemed, as though he really thought Harry couldn’t make a successful argument.

“I have to let James and my brother know what happened,” he said evenly.

“I have already done so,” said Snape. “And Draco, and Narcissa. And the Headmaster knows you are here, Harry, and has agreed to let you stay the summer—and stay out of our way. He has learned better.”

Harry sighed. “I didn’t want to have to say it,” he said. “I’ll remain with you a few days, enough to make sure all the effects of that curse are gone, and then I’m leaving for Lux Aeterna.”

Snape sat back in his chair, releasing his grip on Harry’s hand. “Harry,” he said, “you seem to be under the impression that if I let you go home, you would do something other than attempt to get yourself killed again.”

“That wasn’t deliberate,” Harry snapped, his temper flaring. He saw Snape wince, and calmed his magic as hard as he could. “I know now that I summoned the Death Eaters by letting my magic flare out of control. That won’t happen again. And I won’t venture out to meet with the goblins again, either. They can send messages to me through the wards. I really would have tried to save myself, but someone, Bellatrix probably, cast a spell that destroyed my Portkey first thing. And I couldn’t have known that Rosier would use that spell. I never heard of it.”

“None of that matters,” said Snape, immovable as a petrified tree. “Your father was beyond careless in the first place to send you out with nothing more than a Portkey for protection.”

“I had an alliance compass, too,” Harry said. “In my robe pocket.”

Snape sneered. “Much good that would do you when you were under immediate attack.”

“The goblins helped—“
“It does not matter.” Snape leaned sharply forward. “You are not returning to Lux Aeterna for the rest of this summer, Harry, and not for Christmas or Easter, either, if I have a say in it. I have been worried about you before. My worry increased when you reported Rosier’s letter to me. This attack...” He shook his head. “My demanding that you remain here is as much for my sake as for your own. Your absence has been destroying my ability to do useful work. That will stop now.”

Harry scowled at him. The thing was, he really couldn’t imagine anyone better-suited to protect him than Snape. Snape was harder to evade or distract than most other people, and now that he’d been frightened for Harry’s life, he would make it even harder. He would make restrictions, and he would enforce them. He had no other children to care for, as James had Connor. He was a powerful wizard, and wouldn’t hesitate to use Dark magic in the cause of Harry’s defense, and he could use potions to heal most injuries Harry received, as he’d already proven.

And that was precisely the reason Harry wanted to go home. The restrictions weren’t what he needed, not if he was going to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish this summer. He wanted to be around Connor to encourage him and set him on his own two feet; Remus could only do so much, and so could James. Harry needed to get more used to defending himself, too, and brewing his own potions, which was what he’d been trying to do when the orange mess exploded in his makeshift potions lab.

Snape would insist on getting in between him and danger. He hadn’t yet come to the realization James had, that Harry was in danger every moment he breathed anyway.

So perhaps I can help him come to it, Harry thought abruptly, and nodded. He knew how stubborn Snape could be, how unwilling to recognize reality when it didn’t accord with his preconceptions. Perhaps he needed a blunt, open statement of it to let him face it.

“I could die anyway,” he told Snape calmly. “You can’t wrap me up in cotton wool, and threats could find their way through Hogwarts’s wards if they’re determined enough. So you might as well let me go to a place where I can be useful. I understand you care for me, I know that, but sometimes the most caring act a guardian can perform is to step aside and let his charge make his own mistakes.”

Snape still looked too calm, though Harry could see his fingers spidering along the edge of the blankets, and knew he was feeling at least some rage. “A mistake is one thing,” he said. “And I will indeed be pleased to instruct you in potions and defensive magic, Harry, so that when you face your enemies, you may survive. There is a large difference between that and leaving you to die.”

“James didn’t leave me to die—” Harry started to argue.

“Regardless, you almost did.” Snape’s hand came out and closed around Harry’s left wrist, in the same place that Helcas had held him, and squeezed with no gentle pressure. Harry winced. Snape stopped squeezing, but didn’t let his hand go, instead staring into his eyes with a feral intensity. “And if you are indeed in as much danger as you say, it makes sense that you should be in the place and with the person who gives you the greatest chance of surviving. That person is not James. Or do you disagree with that?” he added, with a little purring tone in his voice that reminded Harry of the way he sounded when he got ready to serve students with detentions.

“No,” said Harry. “But you don’t understand, sir. I want to be with my brother and my father.”

“Why?” Snape asked.

Harry hissed at him.

“I have committed no crime,” said Snape blandly. He still hadn’t let go of Harry’s wrist, and he still hadn’t leaned away from him. “I’ve asked you a question. Answer it.”

Harry ducked his head. He hated this. He couldn’t think of a subject to distract Snape, and even if he could, it wouldn’t do much good, not with Snape trapping him like this and able to detect lies as a Legimens.

And meanwhile, all that attention was focused. On him.

He didn’t like it. Remnant of his training, result of his love for Connor, the fact that it was Snape—no, not the last, he would have felt this way if anyone had stared at him with such intensity, he felt this way when Draco did it—he didn’t like it. He didn’t like being stared at, and peered at, and remarked about in wondering tones. Rumors were at least better than the stares, because he could pretend that they didn’t exist if he couldn’t hear them. But he couldn’t escape the stares, and he knew that
meant the person involved was looking at him, considering him, when all Harry really wanted was to duck into the shadows.

That was another reason he didn’t think he could be a leader, no matter what Draco might say. He did well enough in small formal meetings. How in the world could he stand in front of an army or a gathering of wizards expecting a grand speech and not feel frozen and pierced to the bone by the stares? That was Connor’s scene, or the scene that Connor would be master of once he was trained, not Harry’s.

Someone else can get that attention, he thought, as he hunched his shoulders and ducked his head further and felt, all the while, Snape’s hand on his wrist like a manacle, binding him to reality. I know it happens. I have no problem with it. But not me. Not like this. Stop looking at me.

“Answer it,” Snape breathed, and Harry decided reluctantly that he would have to answer it, as long as it meant that Snape would stop looking at him.

He licked his lips and whispered, “I— I think I should try to create a family with them again. I want to reconcile with James. I want to give him a chance. I want to make sure that Connor has what he needs, and does heal from the wounds that Sirius’s death inflicted on him. He does need attention, you know. He needs—”

“We were not talking about your brother,” Snape said. “We were talking about you.”

Harry discovered he couldn’t look up yet, and brought his head back down. He’d counted on mention of Connor to deflect Snape into a tirade about his brother. That evidently wasn’t going to work. He felt stripped naked. “I— I don’t feel like I have much to do with them, now that I know James does want to reconcile with me and Remus is training Connor,” he whispered. “So I’m trying to study. But it’s difficult on my own, and I can’t get any peace, and I keep thinking of other things I should be doing, and trying to build a family step by step with them instead of letting it grow naturally, because if that happens, it’ll all fall apart again.”

“So you don’t want to stay with them,” Snape summed up effortlessly. “Or, at least, that is not your sole ambition. But you feel as if you should want to stay with them.”

Harry nodded, his eyes on his hands. He’d come to that realization early last week, when he’d wondered why his head was filling up with restlessness as he thought of his various tasks, instead of the calm, ordered resolve that he usually got when he made a list of things he had to do. He could have done so many of the things he had to do better at Hogwarts or Malfoy Manor. But he was confined in Lux Aeterna, distant from the people who understood him best, with wards inhibiting his freedom of movement, around a brother who seemed to be doing just fine without him and a father who still didn’t understand him, not yet. It would have been all right if he’d just been with Connor and James for a few weeks. But not a whole summer.

But what if they need you for the whole summer? What if they want you there for the whole summer?

Snape abruptly let go of his hand and sat back. “I want you to stay here,” he told Harry. “You want to stay here. So you will stay here.” He released his breath in small catches, hitches that seemed to stick on his teeth and tongue. “I am not… adverse… to letting your brother and father visit, so long as they do it when I am with you.”

Harry jerked his head up and stared at him, so fast that he hurt his neck. “But you said that you were at the beginning of summer,” he said. “You said that you wouldn’t let them visit.”

“Things have changed,” said Snape, raising his eyebrows, as if Harry should take it for granted that he could change his mind, even though he’d almost never done it before. “In particular, I have been without your company for nearly two months, and I have found communication by letter an insufficient substitute. If you wish to stay here, and you wish to have your brother and father visit you, I see no reason why you should not have both.”

Harry stared at him, waiting for the catch. Snape’s face remained bland, but as open as Harry had ever seen it.

“I— you really mean this?” Harry asked, testing. “You won’t change your mind later and not let them visit?”

Snape shook his head slowly. “I swear by Merlin that I mean it, Harry,” he said. “Of course, I will supervise the visits, and restrict them by length, and they will be dependent on the politeness of the Potters as well as my own. But you matter more to me than an old hatred.”

Harry knew his face was blazing, and he fought back the temptation to cry. This was a day for smiling, instead. He let Snape
see his fierce grin, rather than ducking his head to hide it, and said softly, “Thank you. That’s what I want, then.”

“Then you shall have it, Harry,” said Snape, and rose to his feet. “You will want something to eat, now, and another potion.”

Harry fell back on his pillows and half-closed his eyes, listening to Snape move out of the room. He spent a few minutes, until Snape returned with the food, trying to reason out the tumult of emotions within him.

This is really brilliant, was the best he could come up with.

******

Snape watched Harry silently from the doorway in the moments before he departed to get a tray. The look on Harry’s face had been worth the promise, as he had thought it would be when he made it. He had set himself a rough challenge, but he was determined to overcome it. If nothing else, he could treat it as a competition with James Potter. He was sure the man would crack and be rude before he would.

And it is not as if this is forever, he noted to himself, his glance lingering on a pile of books that had become quite familiar to him, and the parchment and quill ready and waiting for the next letter he would write. Only until a better solution can be found, and James and Lily and Albus all together can be made to pay for their crimes.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: And Then There Were More Letters

July 31st, 1994

Potter:

I must congratulate you on finding an original way to try and get your son killed. Quite ingenious, really, to have him employ his magic outside the wards of the house you are so proud of and then go alone to meet goblins and Death Eaters.

Death Eaters? you will say. I did not send him to meet Death Eaters.

Nevertheless, Death Eaters were there, and they found him. Evan Rosier used the Blood-Burning Curse on him. If you paid any attention during the First War, you will have heard of this curse and its effects. Of course, I must conclude that you never paid any attention during the First War, as otherwise you would have forbidden Harry to leave Lux Aeterna at all while there was any possibility of Death Eaters anywhere nearby. That would require you to have a grain of common sense and a modicum of love for the boy, as well, but observation power must come first.

Harry would have died were I not there. I fetched him, took him to Spinner’s End with me, saved his life, and brought him back to Hogwarts.

He is safe now. He will be safe as long as he is with me. He will never be safe for as long as he is with you. He will stay with me the rest of the summer. Dumbledore will not interfere, and you know it.

If you behave, I may let you visit my ward once or twice before the term begins.

Professor Severus Snape.

******

August 1st, 1994

Snape:

I am glad to hear that Harry is safe. I am always glad to hear that Harry is safe, no matter what else you may think of me.

I would not have let him go alone to meet the goblins, but he insisted. He said that they had told him they would not meet with him if he came with any other wizard, and since he seems so intent on being vates, I yielded. I did not think about the consequences of his magic burst. I did not think it was so strong that Dark wizards could find it from dozens or hundreds of miles away.
I am his father, Snape. If I go to the Ministry and challenge you for legal control of him, who do you think will win?

I will accept that Harry needs to rest, probably for today as well as whatever time he spent with you yesterday. Tomorrow, I will come to fetch him, and I expect you to return my son to me, alive and unharmed.

James Potter,
Master of Lux Aeterna.

******

August 1st, 1994

Potter:

You are not behaving. You will not see Harry tomorrow, or for at least a week, unless he asks to see you. And even then, I will supervise the meetings.

You should have thought of the consequences of leaving him alone, Potter. You did not, and you are sorry. Is that not what you always say? Always you come too late, after your wife has hurt Harry, after Dumbledore has hurt him, after your friend Black has hurt him, after Death Eaters have hurt him, and wail your apologies. That is not good enough. What Harry needs is a guardian who can keep up with him and at least try to understand him, and you are not prepared to do either.

Harry is still asleep. When he wakes, I fully intend to make this the happiest summer he has ever spent. Not that that will be very difficult.

By all means, Potter, approach the Ministry and ask them to put my ward back into your incompetent care. I think you will find that most requests concerning Harry have a way of vanishing into a maze of forms in triplicate.

Professor Severus Snape.

******

August 1st, 1994

Draco:

I wanted to reassure you that Harry, though attacked by Death Eaters yesterday, is currently well and resting in a room attached to my own at Hogwarts. He will be spending the rest of the summer with me. You are welcome to visit in two days, when Harry should have awakened from the potions needed to spare him the effects of the Blood-Burning Curse.

Professor Severus Snape.

******

August 1st, 1994

Rufus Scrimgeour
Auror Office
Ministry of Magic

Dear Auror Scrimgeour:

I thought you might like to know that James Potter will no doubt be shortly approaching the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, to request that guardianship of Harry Potter be transferred back to him. As I know that you have cause to regard Harry favorably, and have approved my guardianship of him besides, this issue might be of interest to you.

Favorably,
Professor Severus Snape.

******
August 2nd, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

That’s awful! Is he awake? Is he able to receive visitors yet? Where were his brother and his father and his werewolf when that happened? Probably behind their wards like the cowards they are! Why didn’t you stop by Malfoy Manor and Apparate with me, too?

My mother and father are beside themselves. At least, my mother is, and my father looks as if he could be. I don’t think I have to tell you how many of their separate hopes and ambitions ride on Harry, and if they plan to stand against the Dark Lord, they need him in other ways.

Tell Harry that he’ll get a hug when he sees me, and a bunch of sweets, and then he won’t move for the rest of the summer without someone being there with him. I need to know if I can come to Hogwarts for an extended stay, Professor Snape. Please say yes. He needs someone with him, and while I trust you and know that you can handle Harry, you’ll have potions brewing work to do. I need to be with Harry. Please say yes. I am going to ask my parents if they’ll agree to let me stay at Hogwarts until the term begins.

Your elegant student,
Draco Malfoy.

******

August 3rd, 1994

Dear Draco:

Harry is currently awake, and has been since yesterday. We have had a slight argument about him returning to his relatives, but Harry has accepted that he will stay with me. He has granted me permission to say that he was going half-mad at Lux Aeterna, and much prefers the intimate company of Slytherins, when he must spend large amounts of time around anyone at all.

I think it would be best to wait a few more days before asking Harry about visitors. He needs the time to relax. He will have visits with his father and brother as well, if they come to deserve them, but be assured that I will supervise those visits. His father and brother and Lupin were all inside Lux Aeterna’s wards. He went alone to meet with goblins as a vates, and that was the cause of his injury.

I did not stop by Malfoy Manor because I was concerned with saving Harry’s life, first and foremost.

You may not stay with us for the rest of the summer. Harry needs time to himself as well as with me, and I know you have already said that you would not allow that. Be assured, he is safe, and does not venture out of Hogwarts. However, once Harry feels like it, visits every other day are not out of the question.

Be assured of one thing, however. He will not return to the custody of his father, not while I am still alive.

Professor Severus Snape.

******

August 4th, 1994

James Potter
Lux Aeterna

Dear Mr. Potter:

I must express my deep concern that your serious question, regarding reversing the guardianship of Professor Severus Snape over your son, Harry Potter, has gone unaddressed for two days. I have spent that long researching the specifications of the case, since I could not remember them; it has been months since the files have been looked at. As well, the necessary forms
have been misplaced. You see, the Department of Magical Family and Child Services recently suffered the loss of its master filer, who was sacked for accepting bribes, and no one else knows the filing system as he did.

We are extremely sorry for the confusion. However, as the guardianship was approved and not contested even when Harry Potter’s official residence was changed to Lux Aeterna, we believe little harm can be done in continuing to leave the boy where he is for now. We are still searching for the necessary forms, and will send them to you as soon as we have them in hand.

Regretfully yours,
Rufus Scrimgeour
Head of the Auror Office.

*******

August 4th, 1994

Snape, you slimy bastard:

I know that you’ve got an ally in the Ministry somewhere! The sacking of the secretary is too great to be coincidence. Who would have thought a half-blood Slytherin’s reach went so high up?

I am going to find a way to get Harry away from you. Be assured of that.

James Potter.

*******

August 5th, 1994

Potter:

Dear dear. It seems that you haven’t behaved well enough to earn a visit with Harry yet.

Professor Severus Snape.

*******

August 7th, 1994

Dear Harry:

I know that Dad said I shouldn’t write to you, because you’d probably show the letter to Snape, but I want to.

I think I understand why you left, and why we weren’t doing that great a job. Hermione was right, and I should have asked you about stuff more. I saw that you were unhappy a few days ago, but when I asked and you said nothing was wrong, I just let it go. I should have asked about it a little more. Sorry about that.

Was it something I did? I can try to make it up to you if you want. Was it something Dad did? I can try to get him to apologize.

I’m very, very glad the Death Eaters didn’t kill you. That sounds stupid, I know, but that’s all I know how to say about it.

If Professor Snape won’t let Dad and me visit you before school starts, will you at least be able to make the Quidditch World Cup? I think it’s on the 25th of August. Wait, let me look at the calendar…yes, that’s it! Snape could come with you, if he wants. I find it awfully hard to imagine him enjoying a Quidditch World Cup, but I find it harder to imagine him letting you go anywhere alone. Dad and Ron and Ron’s family and I are all going to be there.

Please give Professor Snape a formal thanks for saving your life.

Love,

Connor.
August 9th, 1994

Dear Connor:

I’ve been doing marvelously, thank you. And no, it was nothing either you or Dad did. I simply didn’t have enough time to do everything I wanted to do at Lux Aeterna, and I didn’t have all the books I needed to do research and brew potions and so on.

It’s been brilliant here. Snape nursed me back to health as well as saved my life, and he’s let Draco visit me, though he doesn’t let me go outside. I find that I don’t mind it so much. We’re discussing Potions theory instead. Hermione would kill to hear some of the things he’s sharing with me. Wait until I tell her!

I’ve given your thanks to Professor Snape. He grunted.

It took me a while to persuade him about the Quidditch World Cup, but he finally agreed, as long as I stay with him at all times I can and in the vicinity of another adult the rest of the time. The Malfoys are going to go, so I’ll have them as extra protection. And you ought to see Draco. He’s been taking lessons from Crups, I think, the way he guards me and whips his wand out the moment anything threatens me. He fried a wasp the other day because he thought it might sting me. I think I’ll be perfectly safe.

See you on the 25th! And tell Dad not to worry too much. I really have been happy.

Love,
Harry.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Five: Never Trust A Rosier As Far As You Can Throw Him

Harry stretched out carefully, with both his body and his magic. He knew what he would encounter, since he’d encountered it many times in his rooms already, but he wanted to feel it again.

Silence and peace met his magic. No one else was in the rooms. There was no one he had to worry about serving or doing things for, no one he had to worry about protecting, no one who might need something from him. He had a soft divan beneath him, cradling his shoulders and back, and making the large book on calming Potions—he still didn’t believe they couldn’t be improved—that he was reading comfortable, even though it rested on his upper chest. The rooms were still.

He had never been able to get that sense of stillness at Lux Aeterna. He was always aware of something. It could have been Connor, or James, or Remus, or one of the many magical artifacts in the house. Whatever he felt, he just wasn’t able to relax.

Here, he could.

Harry rolled his head sideways on the pillow and closed his eyes. He knew that Snape was in his potions lab just beyond these rooms, striving to perfect one of the secret projects that he’d refused to let Harry help him with. He knew that Draco was visiting in a few hours. He knew that tomorrow, they were going to the Quidditch World Cup, and he would see his family again.

But for now, he could calm himself.

If no one was near him, there was no one whom he had to worry about protecting.

Harry let out a small sigh. He didn’t mean to do it, since he still had his glasses on and the heavy book resting on his chest, but he did it. His breathing evened, and he slid into sleep, one of his hands just barely remembering to steady the book so that it wouldn’t slide to the floor with a thump and wake him up.

*******
Snape entered Harry’s library intending to ask him if he wanted to practice his Disillusionment Charm potion—he at least knew, now, not to mix the lioniidragon scales and the demiguise hair, which he had indeed been doing—but paused at the sight of him asleep. His face looked unlined, and his scar, though revealed by the fall of his fringe, for once wasn’t glowing bright red or bleeding, both of which it had done numerous times since Harry had come to live with him.

Snape knew he should probably wake Harry and convince him that sleeping on the bed was more comfortable than the divan. If nothing else, the position his head was in, half-dangling off the pillow, would give him a crick in his neck when he woke.

He didn’t have the heart.

Silently, before the mere presence of his magic could wake Harry, he stepped gently backward out of the library and closed the door. Then he moved towards the Floo. He would firecall Malfoy Manor and tell Draco to hold off on visiting for at least another hour.

He could content himself with the knowledge that this had indeed been the happiest summer that Harry had ever spent. He had watched his ward’s face grow calmer and calmer in every moment he spent here, and the odd dance of guardianship had grown easier and easier as they practiced at it. Harry did take well to restrictions when Snape could explain them to him, and if Snape sometimes had to use emotional blackmail to get him to rest or slow down, the need for that lessened as the days passed. Harry had laughed at Draco’s protectiveness and frowned at potions and discussed magical theory with academic passion as well as with an eye to what the spells could eventually be useful for.

Snape wished he could forget the curse that had made Harry spend his summer like this in the first place, and that it was ending tomorrow, and that Harry should have been able to have a summer like this every year, if it was what he wanted, and that Harry was only fourteen years old and already a soldier.

He shook his head as he made the firecall. He did have to face up to reality, and pockets like the hour of sleep he was preserving for Harry were only that, pockets of softness scattered in a hard world that was anything but forgiving of them.

But for now, he would preserve this one.

******

Harry blinked and gasped as the tug of the Portkey, a small coin passed from hand to hand in the Three Broomsticks, released him at last. He moved at once out of the way of the rest of the arriving witches and wizards; a large portion of Hogsmeade’s residents was attending the Quidditch World Cup, and many of them had chosen to come to Madam Rosmerta’s pub for their Portkeys.

Snape steadied him at once with a hand on his shoulder, and glanced around with the faint sneer on his face that Harry was learning to expect. “Disgraceful,” he muttered. “No security at all, of course.”

Harry rolled his eyes. The day was, rather, brilliant with more security spells than they’d had any right to expect, given the wide-open nature of the place and the fact that people would need to wander in and out of the Quidditch area at will.

The grass around them was thick enough that Harry could feel it like a cushion beneath his feet as he walked, and the voices of wizards and witches were continual and loud, mingled with the cries of children. Harry saw families he recognized and families he didn’t, some of the parents hoisting small children to their shoulders as if that would help them see the game, which wasn’t happening yet, a little better. He watched a young witch patiently spelling a tiny girl’s teeth back to white from blue, while her slightly older brother stood next to her and looked innocent of the magic that had turned them way. Harry, tuned to adults’ emotions, shook his head when he saw the witch’s tightening face. She’d be punishing the boy in a moment, all his protests to the contrary.

He turned around, scanning the rows of tents, some of them with absurd flags trailing in the breeze. They bore family coats of arms, the symbols of the Ministry or Diagon Alley businesses, sometimes the image of an award if the wizard or witch inside had received one.

Harry blinked and cocked his head, his gaze darting over the bunting once more. More family coats of arms than there should be, he thought, slowly. I don’t even recognize some of them. People are digging out old and obscure symbols they have no reason to be proud of any more.

Why?
The answer came to him almost at once. The symbols were those of minor pureblood families, so sunken into obscurity that the only thing really separating them from any other wizard in the world was their blood status. They had the same social standing and amount of money as any Muggleborn, and no wizards powerful enough to be Lords or inventors of wonderful spells had been born among them. Pureblood families like the Malfoys and the Blacks, who had managed to retain prestige, money, homes, and reputation, were fairly rare.

Yet those minor families had chosen to drag out the coats of arms that perhaps only Crazy Aunt Mildred had truly cared about, and display them on their flags.

It was a declaring of allegiance, Harry thought, his mind tuned to an entirely different sort of dance than a young witch’s impatience now. These were people who wanted to remind other wizards and witches that, in fact, yes, their family was pureblooded, thank you very much. They might not have anything much to show for it, but damn, they were going to proclaim it.

*Why would they be want to be known as pureblooded?*

*One possible answer: because of what could happen to them if someone were to think they weren’t.*

Harry breathed carefully. He looked up to find Snape’s gaze on him, his guardian already understanding something was wrong. Snape asked the question with his eyes, and Harry nodded to the flags. Snape’s gaze darted after his, and it took him only a moment longer to understand what had concerned Harry. Of course, it would, Harry thought. Snape hadn’t been raised around the pureblood symbols, and wouldn’t know immediately which ones were recognizable.

And then Snape surprised him by thinking of something Harry hadn’t.

“Stay close to me,” Snape whispered, as they began to walk through the lines of tents to the pavilion where they were supposed to meet the Malfoys. “Absolutely close, Harry, do you understand? At the first sign of trouble, we will Apparate back to Hogsmeade. None of this nonsense about Portkeys. I will simply take you in a Side Along Apparition. And keep your shields on your magic.”

Harry blinked at Snape, and then firmed his mouth. Yes, he did understand. The *Daily Prophet* last year, thanks to Rita Skeeter, had reported on his outburst of magic at the Quidditch game, and circulated rumors about him, including that he was a Parselmouth and had somehow been involved in the attacks on other students during his second year. Many people knew something about him, even if it was only a rumor and a vague sense that he was powerful. It would be best to keep his head down and his magic concealed as much as possible.

It didn’t entirely work, he saw as they walked. A few of the people twitched their heads to look at them, and a low murmur spread in their wake. Harry didn’t meet the stares, though, and used a breathing pattern to calm himself when he was about to panic at the thought of wizards and witches staring at him. He could handle this. Really. It wasn’t all that difficult.

*Not at all.*

“Harry! You came!”

Harry was able to look up and smile, as they at last neared the elegant ice-blue pavilion the Malfoys had set up. Draco bounced towards him and enveloped him in a tight embrace. Harry hugged him back, amused. They’d only seen each other yesterday, but Draco acted as though each and every absence were some new opportunity for Harry to slip away from him.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry let Draco go swiftly and stepped back, snapping up his magic around him. He hadn’t noticed Draco’s father standing behind him.

*Careless,* he reprimanded himself, meeting Lucius’s gaze. *How many times do you need to be told to remember your surroundings, Harry? This is the second time in as many months that something has surprised you like this.*

Lucius Malfoy looked much as he had the last time Harry had seen him, last Christmas, if one excused the lack of a handprint on his face. He leaned on a cane with a silver serpent’s head, his robes the old sky-blue ones of celebration. They weren’t much lighter in color than the pavilion’s cloth, Harry couldn’t help noticing. Lucius’s eyes were calm, his face as cool, as ever.
“Mr. Potter,” Lucius repeated. “Since I was to see you today, I thought I would present my midsummer gift in person. Forgive me the lateness, as it is less than a month until the next exchange, but I wanted to consider my response very carefully.” He gave a smile that moved his mouth in odd directions, and reached towards his robes.

Abruptly, his eyes narrowed, and looked past Harry’s shoulder. “I promise I am not going to hex him, Severus,” he said.

Harry glanced up. Snape had his wand drawn and pointing at Lucius. He didn’t move or lower his wand, even when Harry hissed at him.

“The last time you were near my ward but one, Lucius,” he whispered, “you did damage to his mind that it took months to reverse. Forgive me if I find it hard to forgive you.”

Exasperated, Harry wondered if Snape held grudges against everyone in the universe. He reached up and tugged firmly at his mentor’s arm until Snape looked at him. Harry stared back. “The last time I saw him,” he said, “not the last time but one, he gave me a truce-gift that exposed his neck to me. Besides, sir, Mr. Malfoy was the indirect cause of my breaking with my mother at last. I would never have gone home at Christmas if not for him, and that means that I would never have summoned the justice ritual.”

Snape did not look as though this were a convincing argument.

Harry shook his head at him. “This is a truce-dance, sir. You can’t interfere in a truce-dance.” He turned to look at Lucius, noting with approval that Draco had stepped aside and stood silent all this while. He was learning, then, probably from his intense study of pureblood manners and rituals. It was bad manners, very bad manners, to interfere in a gift exchange, especially this late in the truce-dance. In fact, Snape and Draco were being accorded an immense honor in witnessing the exchange at all. Harry decided not to point that out to Snape, though, since he wouldn’t be sensitive of the honor. Harry lifted his chin. “You said that you had a gift for me, sir,” he reminded Lucius, never looking away from him.

Lucius gave him a faint, cold smile. Harry smiled back. He enjoyed this dance with Lucius. They were allies, and it would be a long time, if ever, before they were friends. That meant they had to operate in the dancing ground laid down by ritual and tradition, and that meant no unnecessary attention paid to Harry or suddenly shifting emotional relationships. It was complicated, yes, but it was a complicatedness that was unlikely to change.

“I did indeed, Mr. Potter,” Lucius replied, and pulled the gift from his robes this time, slowly, in deference to Snape’s snarl. Harry expected to see a folded piece of parchment, a return list of Lucius’s ambitions and hopes for the one he had sent him in June, and rather blinked when Lucius extended a slender silver chain with something blue on the end instead. Harry accepted the object and peered at it.

The stone was clear, thought with the blueness actually darting beneath the surface of the facets instead of burning in the heart of it like a diamond, and almost the color of Lucius’s robes—

Of course, Harry thought.

—and egg-shaped. It made a faint buzzing noise as it hung on the chain, and Harry could sense that it had magic, though the magic was faint and old. He looked up at Lucius and waited patiently for an explanation.

“From the Malfoy family treasuries,” Lucius said casually. “A gift of defense and protection, once handed down from heir to heir. It expended most of its magic on defending my father from a Cruciatus Curse when he was fourteen. Since then, we have kept it, as a sentimental reminder more than anything else.” He raised an eyebrow. “But, of course, a reminder of how fierce the Malfoys can be in defense of their own, as well.”

Harry understood in a moment. Lucius had chosen to complement Harry’s own midsummer gift, not match it exactly. As Harry had sent a gift that looked forward to the future, Lucius had sent one that looked back to the past.

And one that bound Harry more and more tightly, not just to Lucius, but to Lucius Malfoy.

Harry wondered what the man had expected as a reaction. Whatever it had been, it didn’t appear to be Harry casually lifting the pendant and dropping the stone to rest against his own chest as he linked the chain around his neck.

“You accept, then, Mr. Potter?” Lucius asked.

“Of course, Mr. Malfoy,” Harry said. “It would be a pity if I did not, after all the dancing we have done so far.”
“Harry.”

Harry turned in relief as Narcissa stepped out of the pavilion, grateful that she was here now and he no longer had to pretend to a level of comfort with the situation that he didn’t feel. He trusted her to mediate between her husband and him. She, too, wore sky-blue celebration robes, but her face was much calmer than Lucius’s, her eyes watchful but gentle.

“Mrs. Malfoy,” said Harry, and kissed the hand that she extended to him. “I trust that you have been well? I know we have written, but I haven’t seen you for almost a month, and there are some things it would be unwise to put in letters.”

Narcissa’s lips twitched, and she nodded. “Indeed, Harry. Suffice it to say that I must be well, never having got as much exercise as this before. My legs are nearly worn out with all the dancing.”

Harry felt Draco’s arm settle around his shoulders, and his friend whispered into his ear, “Do you have to discuss this? Couldn’t we go and buy Omnioculars for the game?”

Harry patted his arm, and turned back to Narcissa. “I hope you are not too tired to dance any more?”

“I do not think so,” she said consideringly. “When one becomes tired of the waltz, after all, there is always the pavane.”

Harry nodded. “When you are ready to stop dancing, Mrs. Malfoy, if you are ever ready, just let me know.”

Narcissa blinked, once, twice. Then she said, “I would think that I can always find strength in my legs as long as I am still alive.”

Harry studied her with narrowed eyes. She was in effect saying that she would continue trying to bring wizards and witches to his side, even though Harry had offered to let her debt to him for her mistakes be fulfilled. Of course, she had the motivation to protect Draco, as well, and that could be one reason that she didn’t want to stop the danger she was putting herself in. But Harry would have thought there were less risky ways she could achieve Draco’s safety.

“Well, if she does want to risk herself, and chooses to do so, then I cannot interfere.” Harry inclined his head. “If you say so, Mrs. Malfoy.”

“I do,” said Narcissa, and then smiled at Draco. “Do go find the Omnioculars, Harry, before my son drags you off your feet in searching for them. Severus, always a pleasure.” She extended her hand for Snape to kiss, and then swirled back inside the pavilion. Lucius remained outside, watching them, as they walked away—well, Draco walked, and Harry was tugged after him—with Snape behind them.

“Finally!” said Draco. “They’ve been talking about you and that damn gift for ages, Harry. I know that your truce-dance is important, but they seem to forget that you’re just fourteen sometimes and should be allowed to have fun.”

Harry just shrugged and remained quiet. He was here to have fun, as well as to meet with Connor and James, if they could even find them in the immense, shifting sea of people. Now wasn’t the time to give Draco another gentle lecture on how hard it was for him to have fun and how he didn’t want Draco exhausting himself in that futile pursuit.

“Now, where are the Omnioculars?” Draco craned his head. “You’d think there would a readily identifiable flag, but noooo....”

“Harry!”

Harry turned, smiling, at least as much as he could with Draco’s tight grip on his shoulders. After not hearing it for almost a month, his brother’s voice was welcome. Connor was running towards him, his fringe flapping up now and then to reveal his scar, and behind him came a mass of red hair that could only mean the Weasleys. Harry looked for James, but didn’t see him immediately.

Harry tried to step away from Draco so that he could catch Connor at the end of his dash in the kind of hug that his brother seemed to want, but Draco wouldn’t move his arm, and tightened it, making a small sound of protest, when Harry tugged again. Harry rolled his eyes and extended the one hand he could. Connor blinked at him, but then grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically.

“Harry!” he exclaimed again. “How have you been? Do you have Omnioculars yet? Who do you think will win, Bulgaria or
Ireland? I know that Bulgaria has Viktor Krum, but I think the Irish work together better as a team—“

Harry tried to answer the questions, but the Weasleys were coming up just then, and he had to make his greetings to them. He’d only met Arthur Weasley once, and the meeting had ended with a fight between him and Lucius. Harry eyed him apprehensively, but if Arthur still remembered that incident, more than two years ago now, he wasn’t letting it influence the way he reacted to Harry. He nodded to him, and said, “Harry. Ron has told us that you’re recovering nicely from the attack in July?”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Weasley,” said Harry, relaxing a bit.

“Yes, we heard about that,” said Mrs. Weasley, bustling up beside her husband. “You poor dear!” She looked as if she would hug him, and there came an awkward moment when Harry felt like a rope in a tug-of-war contest, since Draco wasn’t about to surrender him, and was getting more and more agitated the more Weasleys joined them. Mrs. Weasley settled for giving him a dimpled smile. “Death Eaters are the nastiest people I know,” she added.

Harry held her eyes. They were kind, but behind the compassion was sorrow that she had a reason to feel. After all, Death Eaters had killed her brothers, even though it had taken five of them to do so.

Lucius Malfoy had been one of those five.

Harry sighed. Sometimes he felt as though he were walking through a world of contradictions, one of which was about to smack him in the face at any time now. “I’m completely recovered now, Mrs. Weasley, thank you,” he said, and looked back for Snape. He found the professor standing slightly to one side, as though he didn’t want to risk contamination. “Professor Snape saved my life. If not for his potions, the Blood-Burning Curse would have killed me.” Snape raised his eyebrows, as much to say that that was an understatement of what had really happened.

“Evan Rosier is alive, then,” Mrs. Weasley whispered. “I hoped that was a rumor. I see it wasn’t.”

Harry blinked at Snape and turned his head back. “Yes, he is,” he said. “He took another Death Eater’s place under a glamour of him for years. I’m sorry that you had to hear the news like this.”

Mrs. Weasley sighed. “Well, we can only hope that the Aurors find the Death Eaters soon, and that they manage to find some way of caging them up again, now that the Dementors are gone.” She shook her head, and managed to drive herself out of sadness as if on a spur. “Of course you know Ron,” she added, as Ron joined Connor, “and Ginny.” She gestured to her daughter, who had halted beside her and seemed to be waiting for her mother to be finished. Ginny rolled her eyes at Harry, as much to say that yes, they did know each other, and it hadn’t been long since they’d seen each other, and wasn’t this reintroduction ridiculous? Harry grinned back, while Mrs. Weasley, oblivious, chattered on. “And here are—” She stopped abruptly, and frowned at Arthur. “Where are the twins?”

Arthur’s face took on a faint panicked expression as he turned around, scanning the grass behind him. “They were right here the last time I looked—”

“Well, we can only hope that the Aurors find the Death Eaters soon, and that they manage to find some way of caging them up again, now that the Dementors are gone.” She shook her head, and managed to drive herself out of sadness as if on a spur. “Of course you know Ron,” she added, as Ron joined Connor, “and Ginny.” She gestured to her daughter, who had halted beside her and seemed to be waiting for her mother to be finished. Ginny rolled her eyes at Harry, as much to say that yes, they did know each other, and it hadn’t been long since they’d seen each other, and wasn’t this reintroduction ridiculous? Harry grinned back, while Mrs. Weasley, oblivious, chattered on. “And here are—” She stopped abruptly, and frowned at Arthur. “Where are the twins?”

Arthur’s face took on a faint panicked expression as he turned around, scanning the grass behind him. “They were right here the last time I looked—”

“Here, Dad! Here, Mum!”

Fred and George was jogging towards them, wearing identical smug grins. Their pockets bulged and jingled. Harry wondered idly if he should tell them that the coins probably weren’t real. With Ireland in the game, there would be leprechauns nearby, and a good deal of false gold.

“We just made—” one of the twins, probably Fred, began.

“A most profitable wager,” the other, probably George, finished, and patted his robe pockets.

“You boys should not be making wagers!” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice rising slightly. “What are you thinking? What kind of example are you setting for Ron and Ginny? Did you think—”

Draco tugged hard on Harry’s shoulders, which he had managed to nest completely under his left arm. “Come on,” he said, whining. “I want the Omnioculars.” From the glare he was giving the Weasleys, Harry thought it was probably time that they found some.

“Harry,” said someone else before he could move.
Harry turned around slowly. James had come up behind the Weasleys, unnoticed, and stood there staring at him. He appeared to ignore both Molly Weasley’s soaring temper tantrum and the long, careful glare Snape was giving him. He had eyes only for his son.

*It will be all right,* Harry reassured himself firmly. *You saw the letters he sent Snape. You know that he wasn’t ready for a reunion before now, and neither were you. You haven’t damaged your relationship irreparably by leaving. It was better this way.*

That didn’t quell the guilt churning in his gut when he saw the look of almost-desperation in James’s eyes.

“Hi, Dad,” he said quietly. “How’s your summer been?”

“Quieter and less exciting than it would have been with you there,” said James, with a faint grin that vanished in the next moment. “But also lonelier. Connor and I missed you, Harry.”

Harry tried to step forward, and found Draco’s arms had dropped to his waist and held him firmly. He turned and glared at him. Draco blinked once, twice, then let him go.

Harry was able to walk forward and embrace his father, though it felt awkward, like hugging a stranger who might or might not pick him up and take him somewhere. James’s hug felt no less awkward. Harry closed his eyes and tried to loose all his impatience and anger in one breath. *You have nothing to be angry at him for. He did nothing wrong. Yes, he shouldn’t have let you go outside the wards with only a Portkey for protection, the way that Snape keeps ranting on about, but neither of you knew. So why are you fidgety and anxious and uneasy around him?*

Harry didn’t know, which made it all the more awkward to hug James and then step back and smile at him. He knew the smile didn’t reach his eyes. He wasn’t sure what to do about it.

He glanced at Connor, and saw his brother watching them with an expression of sympathy on his face. Connor grabbed Ron’s arm and whispered something in his ear, and then both of them and Ginny edged around the Weasley parents and went somewhere else. Mrs. Weasley, still absorbed in yelling at the increasingly sullen twins, didn’t notice. Arthur followed his younger children, looking relieved.

Harry sighed. That was both a good move and a not-so-good one. It left him alone with Draco and Snape and James. On the other hand, it left James alone with Harry and Draco and Snape.

And, sure enough, as though he’d been waiting for a smaller audience, James began.

“Did you really choose to stay with Snape, Harry?” he asked, not bothering to look at Snape. “Or did he force you?”

Harry blinked at him, startled by the tone and direction of the questioning, and heard Snape laugh, an ugly sound, back in his throat. “As if I could make Harry do anything that he does not wish to do, Potter,” he said.

“He’s powerful,” snapped James. “Doesn’t mean that he’s indomitable. And I know you, Snape. You do manipulate people. You tried to manipulate Harry by sending those letters to him in July. So I’ll thank you to keep your nose out of my and my son’s business—”

“He is not just your son,” said Snape, in a voice as sharp as a shout, though much lower than one. “He was not ever your son. You chose to ignore him, Potter, and then he became my ward.” His face wore an expression Harry had not seen on it before, an oddly focused and intent expression. It was not the murderous rage he had worn when he’d almost killed Sirius on the Quidditch Pitch last November, but something deeper and darker, something that frightened Harry. “If you had seen the truth before being forced to it, perhaps you would have some kind of claim on Harry. As it is, you have only the kind that he chooses to grant you.”

“Merlin take you, Snivellus,” James yelled, abruptly losing his temper. “You know why I didn’t—”

He abruptly shut his mouth and stared at Harry, blinking. Harry saw Snape wince and touch his head in the next instant. He sniffed. He regretted giving Snape a headache as his power swelled out of control, but he didn’t care. Both of them were acting childish, and he wasn’t about to take it any more. A guardian and a father *fighting* over him? It was ridiculous. He was damn lucky to have both, and Harry knew it.

“Please shut up,” he said, and then paused when they both stared at him in silence. “Well, that’s accomplished.” He could
feel heads turning around him, and was aware of the Weasleys scratching at their shoulders as they felt his power manifesting, but he had to say this before he put his magic away. “I don’t want either of you insulting each other in my presence. I know that I can’t control what you write in letters, but this is different. This was supposed to be an outing so that I could see Connor and James one last time before school.

“Don’t call him names,” he snapped, turning to face his father. “Yes, I chose to stay with him, and yes, I was happy. I know you don’t understand the connection I have with him, but that’s because we forged it when you weren’t there. Of course you’re not going to bloody understand it.” He felt a hand touch his shoulder, and leaned back into it instinctively. It was Draco, not Snape, and Draco moved when he did, turning to stay behind him as he faced Snape, so Harry allowed it to remain.

“And James is my father,” Harry told Snape, meeting his eyes and not flinching before the cold fury he saw in those depths. He was coldly furious, too, if Snape wanted that, the grass silverying with frost beneath his feet. At least it wasn’t as dramatic a reaction as would have happened last year, before he learned to control his rage. “I know you don’t think I need to associate with him at all, but I want to. And you’re making this harder than it has to be. You’re the one who prides yourself on your understanding of the situation. You’re the one who said I meant more to you than an old hatred. So stop it.” He couldn’t help the betrayed tone that crept into his voice on the last words. The hand on his shoulder tugged at him, and Harry leaned back against Draco, not taking his gaze from Snape’s face.

Snape looked at him with fathomless eyes, then nodded once and looked at James. “A truce, then, Potter?” he asked. “We will only acknowledge each other’s existence when necessary for Harry’s sake, and ignore each other the rest of the time.”

James was breathing fast, his face flushed, but as Harry watched, he seemed to master himself. He nodded once, the motion clipped. “Yes.”

Harry sighed, and tucked his magic back behind his shields. He felt Draco inhale as though releasing a long breath, and smiled when he whispered in his ear.

“Can we see about the Omnioculars now? Please?”

Harry turned and walked away with him, along the path that Ron, Ginny, and Connor had taken. Behind them, he heard Molly Weasley draw in her breath and start on both James and Snape.

“Never seen such a disgraceful display—“

“If you please, ma’am,” said Snape, his voice tight, “my ward should not be leaving without adult supervision.”

“I’m perfectly happy to provide it, Severus,” said Arthur Weasley, bustling back towards them from around a tent. “I can show the boys where to buy flags and anything else they might need for the game.”

Draco looked disgusted at the thought of associating with a Weasley parent, but Harry said swiftly, “That would be brilliant, Mr. Weasley. Thank you.”

He followed, and heard Molly’s voice climbing. “Children, the both of you, and when that brave sweet boy has to act like the adult, then I think there’s something wrong—“

Harry felt no sympathy with Snape whatsoever, and less for James. Both of them had acted like children, and Molly Weasley was a mother. She could scold children well enough to make the twins sullen and angry. That meant she was exactly the right woman for the job in this particular situation.

“Are you all right?” Draco whispered, sliding his hand through Harry’s hair.

Harry sighed, and this time managed to release all the tension. “Yeah. Come on.”

******

“That was a Wronski Feint.”

“That was not a Wronski Feint,” Harry argued right back, adjusting his Omnioculars so that he could keep track of Viktor Krum as the Bulgarian Seeker angled after the Snitch again. “He pulled out of the dive too soon. You could see the way that he was trying to fool his opponent, and that means that it’s not a Wronski Feint. The Feint has to work.”
“But it did work,” Connor argued, pointing to the way the Irish Seeker circled after Krum like a loon with one wing. “See?”

“Not that well,” Harry said, and pulled the Omnioculars from his face so that he could see his brother more clearly. “He tried, yes, but that’s not the same thing as succeeding. You should know,” he added. Connor had attempted the Wronski Feint the first week they were home, and promptly broken his arm. James was luckily good enough with medical magic to heal that.

Connor made a rude face at him. “He is the greatest Seeker in Europe,” he said.

“When he can pull off a proper Wronski Feint, then I’ll agree,” Harry sniffed, and put his glasses back to his face.

So far, the game had gone well. Draco had wanted to sit in the Malfoy box. Connor had wanted to sit with the Weasleys. Harry had compromised by finding them seats in a row a short distance from the Malfoy box. They could see Narcissa and Lucius if they just glanced back, and Draco was sitting at one end of the row, so that, as he’d complained to Harry in a low voice, “none of the unwashed Weasels can touch me.” Harry had pushed him on the shoulder for that one.

The game was taking place over a large Quidditch Pitch in the hollow below them, the grass smoothed with magic and the hollow’s sides Transfigured into seats. Harry approved of the arrangement. They could see all the action without straining their necks, and, thanks to the Omnioculars, replay the events in minute detail if they were questionable in some respect. So far, Krum really had been playing remarkably well, but the rest of the Bulgarian team was too used to depending on him, and flopped about in the air. The Irish team kept stealing the Quaffle and scoring handily.

A roar brought Harry’s attention firmly back to the game, and he lifted his Omnioculars. He could see Krum arrowing downward, his body bent over his broom, his hand extended in front of him as though trying to capture an elusive Snitch just ahead of him. The Irish Seeker was following, desperately trying to catch up, and obviously knowing he wouldn’t be able to.

Harry felt a smile hovering on his lips. He heard Connor cry out beside him, “That’s a Wronski Feint!”

Not exactly, Harry thought, and watched as Krum abruptly angled out of his dive and up towards the Snitch, which had always been hovering just above the Pitch. His hand reached out and handily took it from the air.

It took everyone, including Lynch, the Irish Seeker, a moment to realize what had happened, so thoroughly had Krum’s dive distracted them. Then they roared, and the roars grew louder when the Irish team were proclaimed the winners, never mind Krum’s catching of the Snitch, because they’d managed to score more points with the Quaffle. Harry shook his head and lowered his Omnioculars to his lap.

“You need more help recognizing a feint when you see one,” he told Connor helpfully. “I could show you.”

“Shut up,” said Connor, and shoved him so hard that Harry almost toppled on to Draco. Harry laughed and sat back up, though the arm Draco had wrapped around his shoulders wouldn’t allow him to retreat far. Harry felt Snape shift uneasily in the seat behind him, but ignored him. His mentor had to be able to tell the difference between actual harmful shoving and the horseplay of brothers, and it looked as though he could use the practice. “It’s not as though you could have done that.”

“Could too,” Harry insisted.

“Show me when we’re at school then,” said Connor.

“I will—“

Fuck!

The voice in his head wasn’t his own, and it was all the warning Harry had before the scene, bright with the whizzing robes of the Irish team as they performed their victory lap, darkened abruptly with a burst of malevolent green. Harry felt his scar burst into fire, too, and reeled back in his seat, one hand clapped to his forehead. He heard Draco shout, but wasn’t sure if it was the result of the way he’d moved or the fact that he looked like he was in pain or something else.

Harry’s eyes rose and fastened on the source of the green light. He already knew what he would see, but it was one thing to envision it, and another thing entirely to witness the enormous Dark Mark hovering over the Pitch. He could hear the screams around him edging from confusion into panic.

An amplified voice, too distorted by the loudness for Harry to recognize it, boomed around the Pitch. “Let’s have some real
fun, shall we? *Adflo ventum dirum!*"

The field darkened further. Harry could feel the air around him whirling, the magic dancing in it, drawn towards the center of the Pitch. He felt the wind being sucked out of his lungs, the harsh pressure in his chest as he struggled to get enough air to breathe, the building desperation as his ears began to ring.

Then the spell let out the wind in a forceful *crack*, and it came flooding back over them.

And Harry felt the fear begin.

It attacked the minds of everyone around him, and prompted screams of panic from them. The panic turned quickly into terror, and in some cases into sounds of rage, and in other cases into mindless grunts and growls of the kind that animals might make. Harry felt, as if from a distance, the spell attempting to work on his own thoughts, to tip them towards fear and anger.

He didn’t let it work. He brought up his Occlumency shields, furiously resisting, and felt the wind slam into them and back out of his mind the way that Connor’s compulsion ability did. Snape was snarling behind him, a wordless sound, but not mindless, and Harry knew he must have resisted the same way.

Draco, on the other hand, was struggling beside him, seeming torn between getting his wand out to hex someone and running in fear. Harry grabbed his wrists and thought *Ventus* firmly, holding his eyes. He felt a clean wind of his own run out of his eyes and into Draco’s mind, grabbing and strangling the ill-omened one. Draco let out a loud gasp, then sagged against him.

“What happened?” he whispered.

“The Ill Wind curse,” said Harry, glancing around the Pitch. He could see people tearing into each other, or trampling each other as they ran, or throwing their own wands away as the spell convinced them they were snakes or strangling vines or something else equally horrible. Connor and the Weasleys were already gone. “I’ve heard of it, but I never realized it was like this.” He grimaced, and glanced at Snape. “Can you protect yourself and Draco while I change things?”

“Harry,” Snape ground out, his eyes so angry that he looked half-human at best, “my first priority is your safety, and you know that.” He reached out as if he were going to settle one hand on Harry’s shoulder and prevent him from moving. “There are Death Eaters here. We must move you.”

Just one, Regulus’s voice whispered in Harry’s thoughts. Just the one. I can feel him. Rosier. He’s waiting for you. The western side of the Quidditch Pitch.

“Regulus says there’s just one,” Harry told Snape, even as he turned his head. Sure enough, he could see a figure in a dark cloak standing motionless on the western rim of the hollow, a faint empty space around him even as people fled past him. Harry had to shout to make himself heard, but he never looked away from that single solitary figure. “Rosier. I can take him.”

Snape shook his head, his eyes in constant motion, skimming around the Pitch. “No,” he said. “No, Harry.”

Harry gave him a faint smile. “I’m the only one who can stop this, and you know it, sir,” he said, and then slammed magic into his limbs, tearing free of both Draco’s and Snape’s holds on him. He heard them yell. He didn’t particularly care. He was already gathering his magic to Apparate, keeping his gaze fixed on Rosier. He had no chance of getting through the sea of seats and the confused, roiling crowd if he didn’t Apparate. His only real fear was that the Death Eater would run before he could get there.

*He won’t move*, Regulus whispered to him. *I’ve seen him like this. Once he’s taken an interest in you, he doesn’t run unless you convince him that you really are stronger. And it’s been long enough since that day on the beach that I don’t think he believes that any more.*

Really? Harry couldn’t help but ask sarcastically, even as he heard Snape begin the incantation for a full body-bind. He concentrated, and then the world around him rippled and squeezed him out again as though he were being born a second time, landing him with a *crack* on the western rim of the hollow.

The empty space around the dark-cloaked figure expanded to encompass him. The figure pushed its hood back, and it was indeed Rosier, and he was smiling.

“There,” he said pleasantly. “Now we shall not be interrupted. *Accendo*—”
Harry was already forming his magic in front of him, pushing it as a blade straight at Rosier’s chest. This was something he had thought he might be able to after reading some of Snape’s books on wandless magic. Rosier would have to shield against it, or it would pierce his heart.

Rosier abruptly winced, and gasped, and did a nonverbal spell that halted Harry’s push. He fixed Harry with a gaze into which some respect had fallen, nodding a bit. “Truly impressive, Harry. ‘Enter these enchanted woods, you who dare’. But I had forgotten that the warnings about darkness might also apply to me. You are a Dark wizard, aren’t you?” He was swinging his wand back and forth now, trailing sparks that might be harmless or the beginning of a curse, for all Harry knew.

Harry said nothing. He kept an eye on Rosier, but he was drawing his own strength in, too, tucking it close to his chest. What he had to use would be a simple spell, but incredibly powerful. He had to make sure it was just right, while defending against whatever Rosier threw at him.

Rosier raised an eyebrow, and that was all the warning Harry had before he was convulsing under *Crucio*.

“I tell Bellatrix she has no sense of adventure when she uses this,” Rosier said conversationally, from somewhere beyond the pain. “But sometimes the old methods are the best, don’t you agree? And since she isn’t here tonight, I think I ought to do this, just in remembrance of her.” His voice dropped into what was obviously a quote from a poem again. “‘Of dire wizardry no hint, save mayhap the print that shows hasty outward-tripping toes, heels to terror on the mould.’ They are all running in terror now, and when I repeat the spell, it will be more than that.”

Harry gritted his teeth and rolled under the pain, above it, not letting himself panic as he remembered how the *Crucio* in first year had broken his ribs, not needing Regulus’s whispered reassurances, not letting himself think about anything but resisting the pain and then reaching out and casting the spell at the Pitch—

*Finite Incantatem!* He cried it silently, but with everything in him.

He heard the tenor of the cries from the Pitch change. The Ill Wind curse was gone. People were beginning to breathe normally again. They would wake up completely in a few minutes, with luck.

Meanwhile, the pain flooded him, since he no longer had a bulwark of determination to shield himself against it.

Harry howled, and screamed, and let the agony out any way he could. There was no point in trying to keep silent under torture. They would just have it out of you in the end, anyway, one way or another, and life was more important than pride. Harry concentrated on gathering up the magic inside. That wasn’t hard. It would have been hard to think of anything but the writhing, shrieking pain in his chest.

“This is boring,” said Rosier loudly, cheerfully.

The curse ceased, before Harry could do anything about it himself. He lay there, panting for a moment.

Then he brought his head up as a scorching hex came at him, and blocked that with a *Protego*, and then he was forcing himself to stand and confront Rosier, who danced to the side in a circle, his eyes wide and his face laughing.

“Strong for a child,” he said. “Self-sacrificing for a Slytherin. That self-sacrificial side is probably going to get you killed, Harry, especially since the Dark Lord is returning.” He gave the Dark Mark he’d cast a fond glance. Harry knew he could turn and see it hovering there, skull and snake.

Harry didn’t reply. He thought *Incendio*, and Rosier’s cloak caught on fire. Rosier whirled, dropped it from his shoulders, and continued his circling. At least, Harry thought, they had the clean light of the fire to combat the green horror of the Dark Mark.

“There are some people who will tell you that of course the Light will triumph, the way it always has, but Dark Lords have won before. I think one might win even if you could actually kill my Lord, Harry. After all, you’re awfully like him.”

*Petrificus Totalus.*

The body-bind failed to catch Rosier, who’d already lifted a shield against it. His face was lazy as he considered Harry, and then he grinned and gestured with his wand, murmuring, “*Adsulto cordis!*”
Harry blocked the heart attack spell with a shield, and replied with a nonverbal *Tarantallegra* that actually made Rosier dance for a brief moment before he dispelled it. He laughed then, and his face was open with honest enjoyment as he peered into Harry’s eyes.

“Beware of Moody,” he said.

Harry stared at him. “What?” he asked, despite his resolve not to speak to his enemy again.

Rosier tilted him a slow wink, whispered, “Enter these enchanted woods, you who dare,” and whirled to cast a spell at the Pitch. “Cremo!”

The intense fire that soared towards the sky from the seats and boxes had destroyed enough homes and safe places in the First War that Harry felt compelled to deal with it, and though he managed to calm the flames in a few seconds, the damage was done. By the time Harry turned back, Rosier had Apparated out.

He let out a harsh breath, and asked Regulus, *Does he always do that?*

*Rosier doesn’t “always” do anything*, said Regulus, his voice flat and angry. *He’s completely unpredictable in his specific actions, Harry. And that warning, if you can call it that? What the hell did that mean? Alastor Moody is a respected Auror. He wouldn’t betray you to the Death Eaters, and it seems useless to encourage you to distrust him.*

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes. *Do you know why he might have wanted to come here tonight?*

*Mainly to frighten people, I think. That was the purpose of the Dark Mark in the sky and the Ill Wind curse, at least. But also to test you, it looks like. I don’t know why. It’s not as though he’s going to abandon the Dark Lord and join you, and you wouldn’t really want him on your side, anyway.*

Harry snorted. *No. He looked down at his trembling hand and sighed. Damn it, he’d been put under *Crucio* yet again, and though it couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, whatever it felt like, he just knew that Snape would be very unreasonable about all of this and insist on bundling him up again.*

*Can you feel Snape at all in the crowd?* he asked Regulus, while swatting at his hair. There was an insect of some kind in it, but it fell and flew away at his swat. Harry closed his eyes. He could feel the fine trembling that was the aftermath of pain and shock creeping through his limbs, but he didn’t want to lie down or faint. There would be time for that later, after he made sure that everyone who mattered to him was all right.

*Right behind you*, said Regulus, sounding just the tiniest bit amused. *Climbing the ridge. Harry?*

“Yeah?” Harry blinked and shook his head. He was getting black spots in front of his eyes. *Damn Rosier.*

*Find me and put me back in my body as soon as possible*, Regulus said. *I can give you advice, but it’s patently obvious that you need as many people to protect you as possible, and I’d rather be there fighting in body.*

Harry started to respond, but Snape grabbed him by the shoulders then, spun him around, and Apparated. Harry blinked and shivered, then blinked again as he found them standing on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. He looked up at Snape in tired incomprehension.

“But what about Draco and—“

“Mr. Malfoy is fine,” said Snape, seizing his wrist. “I saw him reunited with his parents before I set out to look for you.” His eyes bored into Harry’s, intense and angry. “You promised me at the beginning of August that if you were ever in Rosier’s vicinity again, you would not seek him out.”

Harry blinked. He had made that promise, and easily, because he could not imagine a situation in which he would be close to Rosier again any time soon. “I’m sorry—“ he began.

“I’m very angry that you disobeyed me, Harry.”

Harry shivered. The voice was cold and dark, and promised plenty of awful things. “Um. Sorry?”

“You should be.” Snape leaned down and stared into his face. “You will remain in Hogwarts until term begins, bar any
strictly necessary excursions, in which I will be with you at all times. Draco will not be allowed to visit you again before school starts. And I will require you to brew me as many boil cure potions as you can before September first.”

“But boil cure potions are boring,” Harry protested, before he could think better of it.

“Exactly,” said Snape, and then paused to study him. “What did he hit you with?”

Harry winced. “Crucio.”

“Detention for the first week of school, for not telling me at once,” said Snape evenly. “Now, come, Mr. Potter. I have potions that will reverse the effects of the Cruciatus Curse, as well you know.” He set off towards Hogwarts, not lessening his hold on Harry’s wrist. Harry put his head down and followed, sighing when he stumbled now and then over small, hidden hollows in the grass.

He knew Snape’s anger was prompted by fear. He knew that he’d broken his promise. But still, what else could he have done? He was the only one who could have dispelled that Ill Wind curse.

But you could have done that without going to confront Rosier, Regulus muttered at him.

You were the one who told me that he was waiting for me! Harry exclaimed, unable to believe how unfair this was. I had to handle him!

No, you didn’t, Regulus disagreed. And if I had known for sure what you would do, I wouldn’t have told you where he was. What did your duel with him accomplish, Harry? Exactly nothing. You could have dispelled the curse and stayed safe.

But then he might have hurt someone else, Harry protested.

Instead, he hurt you, Regulus snarled. Oh, yes, that was a brilliant solution, Harry. Stop risking your life needlessly. And Harry felt the intense silence in his head that usually indicated Regulus had left and gone elsewhere.

It mirrored the silence outside as they reached their rooms in Hogwarts, Snape fed Harry his potions, and he went to bed. Harry lay awake for a while with his arms folded behind his head, staring at the flames and wondering if Connor was all right, and James, and the Weasleys.

He knew that he couldn’t ask Snape right now. His guardian would refuse to answer, and his punishments would be raised.

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. Damn it, he’d just wanted to help, and it did seem as though the people around him were overreacting, but he probably should have been more careful.

He didn’t know how to be, though.

He drifted into a restless, troubled sleep.

******

After the third attempt to pour himself a glass of wine had failed, Snape turned and hurled the goblet into the fireplace. It broke with a loud, satisfying crash, and he snarled, glad that silencing charms warded his rooms.

He sat down in his favorite chair and stared at the flames.

Was there no end to the trouble that Harry could get in to? Was there no way to protect him?

Snape closed his eyes. Strike at the root of the problem. That is what I must do. Punishments won’t do it; I don’t think that anything I can say will make much of an impact on Harry’s behavior for long, unless I threaten to end the guardianship, and I cannot do that, not now. He would never believe me, anyway.

No, what I must do is change his attitudes, especially the one that says he is to be a weapon and a sacrifice, and it is therefore all right for him to risk his life. He does not think twice about the danger he goes into. Oh, he cares what we think, Draco and I, and he does not want to cause us pain, but in this case he weighed our welfare against the crowd’s, and since we were safe and not the object of Rosier’s attention, he saw no reason not to go into danger and try to stop it.
Another project for this year, then.

Ah, Harry. You are the most complicated person I have ever known.

A flutter of wings made Snape blink and look up. An owl had found its way through the hole in the wards that he left specifically for owls bearing parchment that was not enchanted in any way, and had landed on his table, waiting. Snape sighed and went to fetch a treat for it.

His heartbeat spiked sharply when he saw that the letter on the owl’s talon bore a Ministry seal. He tore open the envelope and drew the parchment inside out.

August 24th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

It has come to our attention that your ward, Harry Potter, is a Parselmouth. One may be excused ignorance, but under the newly passed Ministry Edict 6.7.3. For the Control of Dark Talents, Mr. Potter is required to come to the Ministry and register himself as being in possession of a Dark gift. This is being done for the safety of everyone in the wizarding world, and I am sure that you will not refuse such a reasonable request. Please bring Mr. Potter to the Ministry to register no later than the first week of Hogwarts term. Unless he is registered, Mr. Potter will not be able to attend Hogwarts with Light wizard students.

Sincerely,

Dolores Umbridge,
Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic.

Snape dropped the letter and drew his wand, conjuring several light wooden figures in the space of a heartbeat. In a moment, a curse had destroyed one of them, frying it so severely that charred fragments slammed into the wall.

It was obviously a night for breaking things, and in the end Snape destroyed several dozen of the figures before he trusted himself enough to put his wand away and go to bed.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Six: Ministry on the Rise

“Here. Drink this.”

Harry blinked sleepily and managed to accept the vial that Snape held towards him. He swallowed the potion inside, and blinked again as it seemed to whip the cobwebs of drowsiness from his mind. He studied the vial in wonder. It hadn’t tasted much different from an ordinary Pepper-Up potion, but the result was far more dramatic. “What was that?”

“Something to make you think more clearly,” Snape said. From the sharp look in his eyes, he’d had some himself already. “I need you awake and prepared. Today, we must go to the Ministry.”

Harry stared at him. “That’s a strictly necessary excursion?”

Snape raised his eyebrows, and Harry glanced away with a flush. “Sorry, sir,” he said, and then noticed that Snape was carrying a folded newspaper in one hand. He pointed. “Does that explain why, sir?”

“In part,” said Snape. “If you were less well-known, I might try bribes or some other way of slipping you under the Ministry’s insistence on registering you, but not now.” He gave Harry a disgusted glare and extended the Daily Prophet across the bed at him.

Harry picked it up, and blinked at the photograph on the front page. It showed the Dark Mark floating above the pitch at the Quidditch World Cup, which was no surprise, but it also showed two dim figures that he recognized as he and Rosier fighting their duel. The smaller one fell to the ground even as he watched. “Who took this?” he whispered. “Who could have been close enough to take this?”

He understood, in part, when his eyes fell on the headline and the byline.
BOY HERO DEFEATS DEATH EATER
By: Rita Skeeter

Harry groaned and buried his head in his hands. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes,” said Snape, sounding remarkably like Draco when he’d brought Harry his Firebolt. “This story goes into immense detail.” He’d moved around the bed, and jabbed a fingertip down in the middle of the column below the photo. Reluctantly, Harry picked up his glasses from the nearby table, slipped them on, and then studied the writing.

...When the Aurors arrived, they found the Ill Wind curse, used to great effect by the mysterious Death Eater on the World Cup crowd, already dissipated.

“We don’t know who did this, exactly,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt, a senior Auror for the Ministry. “But we know that every trace of the curse had been banished when we arrived. Someone used a Finite Incantatem most probably, but it would have to have been of immense power.”

There is speculation among some of the Aurors that the caster of that spell was also Harry Potter, the boy who battled the Death Eater on the hill.

“I mean, it would make sense,” said an Auror who gave her name only as Tonks. “Immensely powerful boy appears, duels immensely powerful Death Eater, and then causes immensely powerful Death Eater to flee. It sounds to me like he had the magic to make the spell do what he wanted it to do, too.”

Sources whom we cannot reveal confirm that the Ill Wind curse did indeed seem to dissipate during Harry Potter’s battle with the Death Eater.

Harry sighed and put the paper down, though he did wonder about that last paragraph. Most of the people under the effect of the Ill Wind curse would have been so confused and blurred in their thoughts by emotion that they couldn’t have said for sure when the spell ended. “And I assume that most of the wizarding world has already seen this by now?”

Snape nodded, his mouth thin. “She also repeats the information that she has used in other stories from the last year—for instance, the fact that you are a Parselmouth. There are now many people who will know this as certain fact, or think they do, and many others who will have been reminded.” He pulled a crumpled letter from his pocket and extended it to Harry.

Harry read it and sighed. “And so I have to register, since everyone and his sister knows I’m a Parselmouth,” he muttered.

Snape nodded again. “With luck, it will be nothing more than signing a form confirming that you have the gift. However, I would rather move now, before there can be any fuss about a ‘boy hero’ and a Dark wizard not fulfilling this Ministry edict.”

Harry nodded back to him, then realized with shock that he had completely forgotten to ask about Connor and the Weasleys and James. Snape had hit him so hard with the potion and the newspaper that it was understandable, but he still felt a bit of guilt as he asked, “Sir? Did everyone else get home safe?”

“There were some casualties from the crowd’s trampling,” Snape said quietly. “No one whom you know was among them.”

Even knowing that Snape had probably phrased it that way to lessen his guilt, Harry still winced. If he hadn’t showed off by dueling Rosier, then he probably could have dissipated the Ill Wind curse before it killed anyone, and there certainly wouldn’t have been Skeeter’s stupid story in the Prophet. He bowed his head.

“Harry.”

He started. For some reason, he had been sure Snape had left the room. You really need to stop doing that, he reminded himself, and looked up at his guardian. “Yes?”

“It was not your fault,” said Snape, enunciating every word the way he would Potions instructions in class. “You cannot save everyone. You are not the sacrifice for everyone. Remember that.”

He held Harry’s eyes until he nodded, then swept from the room, calling over his shoulder, “Prepare yourself for the Ministry, and make sure that you eat some breakfast. I will know if you have not.”
Harry climbed out of bed, stretching his arms. He paused when he felt a brief restriction on his movements, and swatted at his hair, wondering if another bug was in it.

He found nothing, however, and after a moment the sensation faded. Harry shrugged. *Probably from sleeping too tightly coiled up in the sheets.*

*******

Harry stuck close to Snape. He knew it was ridiculous, but he’d never been in a place so noisy as this part of London, and it was overwhelming him. Diagon Alley was much quieter. Here, there seemed to be people absolutely everywhere, including in corners where his eyes did not expect to encounter them, and many of them were yelling and laughing and dashing across streets and throwing things to each other or over their shoulders, as if they had no care in the world. It was a flat, sunny day, perhaps the last one of August, and obviously they intended to enjoy it as much as possible. Harry could appreciate that from the distance of a newspaper article or a book.

*But,* he wondered, flinching as a bottle flew over his head, *do they have to be so enthusiastic about it?*

“Here we are.”

Harry blinked. He’d been walking with his head down for the past few minutes, and hadn’t noticed when they turned into a street which was marginally quieter, though far dirtier than the norm. They passed a wall along which someone had drawn a careful, spiraling design in green and red, and someone else had drawn a blue hand scratched through it. ALL HAIL THE HAND, said another line of blue letters beneath that.

Harry shivered. This was as alien and dangerous a place as the Forbidden Forest, in its own way. At least he knew that he could use magic to save his life if he encountered a hostile creature in the woods. He wasn’t sure what remedy would work best for Muggles, and he was forbidden to use magic in front of them anyway.

Snape stepped into a tall but not very large box, drawing Harry with him. In front of them hung a device that Harry vaguely recognized from one of the Muggle picture books his mother had sometimes let Connor read. It was a telephone. Snape reached out, and, with a look of distaste, punched five buttons on it, in a sequence too fast for Harry to make out. He resolved to get Snape to tell it to him later.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.”

Harry squinted. He could just make out the shimmering trace of the spell that funneled the welcoming witch’s voice through a spot in the air. It plunged past the telephone and into the ground. Harry raised his eyebrows. *Ah, so the Ministry really is beneath the surface?*

“Severus Snape and Harry Potter,” Snape said sharply but clearly, the distaste for this whole ridiculous charade written all over his face. “Here to register Harry Potter as a Parselmouth.”

There came a soft whirring sound, and two silver badges dropped into Snape’s hand. He sorted through them, found Harry’s, and handed it to him, pinning his own to his robes. Harry followed suit.

The phone box lurched and began to descend, startling Harry, but not as much as it would have if he hadn’t discerned that the offices were underground. The ride wasn’t long, and since Snape was obviously boiling under the surface, Harry decided he wouldn’t say anything. The first person to talk to Snape was going to get a flood of vitriol, however carefully concealed.

The door of the telephone box opened, and Harry blinked. The room beyond was enormous, and flooded with light. There were more fireplaces than one person could ever need along both walls, and the ceiling was, for some reason, blue, with golden symbols. Harry scowled at it. He didn’t think he could remember any pureblood family that used those two colors in such brilliant and garish combination, and now he could see why.

“This way, Harry.”

Snape strode determinedly down the middle of the room, leaving Harry to follow. He did, but paused as he saw the fountain ahead of them.

It was made of gold. That was the first problem; Harry saw no reason to use that much gold on anything, and so it just struck him as ostentatious. The second problem was the statues that made it up. A wizard, a witch, a goblin (quite obviously a
southern one, and not a northern one), a house elf, and a centaur stood in what was probably meant to be a brotherly or comradely pose. What Harry mostly saw was the way that the house elf, goblin, and centaur gazed at the humans as though about to collapse and fawn at their feet.

He breathed deeply, relaxing his physical sight, and then staggered back and put a hand over his eyes. The room was flaring like the sun. There were at least three webs connected to the fountain, so brilliant that Harry knew they must be powerful. He had to pick his way carefully among the radiances, but he thought he made out a blue web, a golden one, and one that was either also golden or a pale orange, like the sky at sunrise.

“Harry? Harry!”

Harry came back to himself, and even managed to step away in time to avoid Snape’s reaching hand. He nodded to him. “I’m all right,” he whispered, and gestured at the fountain. “I just don’t like that very much.”

“The Fountain of Magical Brethren, it’s called.” Snape said it with a sneer, but Harry thought that was automatic. He was looking carefully at Harry now, as though trying to decide whether he needed to be taken back out of the Ministry.

Harry choked back the bitter laughter that wanted to rise out of his throat. “Yes, I suppose it would have to be.”

He gave the fountain a final glance, then shook his head and followed Snape down the room. He let the sight of the webs slide away again. He couldn’t do anything about them right now, and doubtless the Ministry had alarms of some kind waiting to activate should he touch the webs or employ any magic powerful enough to break them. After he’d freed the Dementors, they would have been mad not to.

The room ended in a pair of golden gates, in front of which stood a bored-looking wizard behind a small stand. He nodded to them, and switched on a smile that didn’t look natural on his face. “Greetings and welcome to the Ministry of Magic! My name is Eric. Let me register your wands for you.” He held his hand across the stand.

Snape, though obviously reluctant, surrendered his own wand. Harry watched and practiced smiles and lost voices in his head, so that he would look more innocent when Eric turned expectantly to him.

“I, um, didn’t bring my wand,” Harry said.

He heard Snape’s hiss. “What?”

“Well, we moved so fast this morning, I just forgot,” Harry told him. And it was true. He often didn’t use the cypress wand any more, though most of the time he still carried it. It was currently lying in a drawer of the table beside his bed. He shrugged at the guard. “I’m sorry. Can I still visit the Ministry?”

Eric chuckled. “Of course, son. Just remember to carry your wand with you!” He wagged his finger at Harry. “Little wizards like you will be snapped up otherwise!”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, while wondering why the Ministry had hired someone who would say something like that the morning after a Death Eater attack. “Thank you, sir.” He nodded to Eric, and let Snape escort him through the gates, ignoring his mentor’s hiss, of, “We will discuss this later.” The important part of that sentence was the “later.”

Eric called after him. “Oh! Sir! I forgot to tell you where you’re going.”

Snape turned around with barely controlled anger. “I assumed,” he said, “as anyone would, that we will go to the second floor, because that is where the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is.”

Eric abruptly seemed to shrink. “Um.” He stared at his hands for a second, then shook his head. “No,” he said, and blurted the next words so fast that Harry almost couldn’t make them out. “Fourth floor, sir.”

Harry felt the moment when Snape went absolutely still. Not even his hand on Harry’s shoulder pressed down. He simply stood there, and then breathed, “What?”

“Yes, sir,” said Eric, taking refuge in babble. “I thought it was unusual, but they said, they said it was official, and I said of course I’d tell the visitors like—like yourself, sir, and they said it made sense, and on one level I have to agree, because of course we don’t want Dark wizards running around and using their powers, not that that means this boy is a Dark wizard, of course, I saw the story in the Prophet, I think he did some good last night, I think—“
“Come, Harry,” said Snape, his voice clear as a diamond. “We are going to the fourth floor, and the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.” His hand clamped down this time, as he almost dragged Harry along to the lifts.

Harry set his feet and shook his shoulder, dragging it free of Snape’s grasp in a moment. “Why are you so angry?” he asked quietly.

Snape turned on him. “They think you a magical creature,” he hissed.

“No,” Harry pointed out. “I don’t think they do, at least not on the same level that they think of, say, goblins.” He put aside thoughts of the fountain behind them, as it was only making him angry. “I think this is a public relations message. They want everyone else to think that a Parselmouth is a kind of dangerous magical creature, to be tolerated only if he registers.” His mind was already speeding ahead, turning over the implications. He knew what the Ministry had wanted to do, but he was going to make it backfire on them if he could. At the very least, he could tell Fawkes about this, though he could not understand what the phoenix would say in reply, and he would spread the word to other magical creatures. “I don’t mind. I’m honored to be in the same place where they made Remus and Hawthorn and the other werewolves register, and once the house elves and the goblins hear about this…”

He looked up at Snape with a smile. “They might have been able to do nothing else that would help me so much in my work as vates.”

Snape, he saw, was not smiling. Snape, he saw, was so far from smiling that his face looked as if he would curse the next person to cross his path. Harry shook his head.

“How you see?” he whispered. “They intended it as a humiliation, yes, a reminder of my ‘proper place,’ but that doesn’t mean I need to take it that way. They can insult me only if I let them.”

Snape stared hard at him. Harry stared back, and even relaxed his shields enough to let Snape read his mind with Legilimency if he wanted. He really was not bothered by this, not when his enemies had just handed him such a fine weapon.

Snape nodded once, and then said, as they headed for the lifts again, “Now, you will explain to me why you are walking about without your wand.”

Harry winced. Yes, if he can’t attack one target, he just goes for another.

******

“Sign here if the information on this form is correct.”

Harry sighed and bent over the form in front of him, stretching out his cramped hand before considering the information, mostly basic: on which day he’d been born, the full names of his parents, the place of his birth, and so on. This wasn’t as hard as he had thought it would be, but it was far more boring. He had to sign and complete many forms, often in triplicate. He was finding it harder to understand Scrimgeour by the moment. Not only did the man say he liked this stuff, he’d built up a reputation of truly liking it. How could he have stood the torture?

Snape stood behind him, arms folded across his chest. The cheerful young witch behind the desk kept shooting him glances that edged steadily from nervous to terrified. Harry understood. Snape didn’t need to say anything. He could intimidate with a single glare.

He completed that form and handed it across the desk. While the witch considered it, Harry glanced around the office. It was open and airy, or it seemed that way, with high ceilings and multiple desks and windows that showed an impossible, magical vision of the sun soaring across a cloudless blue sky. Harry was not sure which division they were in; he had seen only a few wizards and witches wandering by, and no magical creatures. Most of them had paused as though wondering what Harry was doing there, or perhaps recognizing him from the photos later in Skeeter’s story, but all of them picked up their pace the moment they spotted Snape.

The witch’s warm voice brought Harry back to the present. “Excellent, dear. Now, just one more form, and we’ll be done.” She pushed the last, single, solitary paper to him across the desk. Harry felt his heart warm. This was tedious and boring and necessary, and after his realization that the Ministry classed him as a magical creature, nothing had been fun. He scanned the form quickly. It was only a few lines, but in legalese, so it took him a moment to work out what it meant.
He sat back, carefully, and put the quill down in front of him, flexing his fingers. The witch looked at him and tutted. “Sore
hand, dear? That’s all right. You can take a moment to relax before you sign.”

Harry met her eyes calmly and said, “I’m not putting my signature to this.”

The witch’s mouth dropped open in a pretty picture of shock. She had dark hair and gray eyes that reminded Harry of
Sirius’s, at least in the amount of surprise they could hold. “Oh, but dear, you must. You’ve done so well with all the others!
You’ll need to sign this one, too. It’s the final step in the registration.” She gestured at the form and smiled, as though Harry
could have missed that there were no other papers waiting under this one.

Harry stared at her. “I know that. But this form says that I’m not to speak to snakes again without risking a legal penalty from
the Ministry. I’m not going to do that. I’m perfectly willing for the Ministry to know that I’m a Parselmouth and keep all my
forms on file just in case a Parselmouth ever commits a crime—” that was the official excuse for the registration the witch
had given him “—but I won’t actually stop myself from using my gift. Did you make the werewolves sign a form to keep
from transforming every month?”

The witch uttered a nervous titter. “Now, dear, you know that—that isn’t the same thing. Lycanthropy is a disease, and they
can’t help being sick.” She leaned forward confidingly. “They aren’t normal wizards, anyway. But you are, dear. And you
know the difference between right and wrong, don’t you? And you want to be on the side of right and law? So, you can
choose to control your talent. That’s all.” She tapped a finger on the form coaxingly.

Harry half-closed his eyes, and recalled one of the other forms he’d signed. “I’m also legally responsible to help the Ministry
if they should need my Parseltongue abilities, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” said the witch, “but they meant they would question you about them, dear, not order you to use them—”

Harry snapped his eyes open and glared at her. “And what if I could have saved someone’s life by speaking Parseltongue,
and I don’t do it because of the legal penalties, and then a person dies from a venomous snake’s bite? Could I be charged
with that person’s death as a murder, since I had the power to prevent it and didn’t do anything about it?”

The witch opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She began shuffling through the forms that Harry had already signed.

“I wouldn’t put it past them to do that,” said Harry. He sat on his rage with an effort, and kept his voice cool and cutting.
“They could, if I signed that form. So, I won’t.” He stood up. “Thank you for helping me sign the other forms. And feel free
to tell anyone you want about this.”

“You can’t do this,” said the witch desperately. “Dear, the law’s very clear—all Parselmouths and possessors of other Dark
talents have to register, and completely—”

“Can you stop me?” Harry asked her softly.

The witch picked up her wand. Harry met her eyes, and waited.

Abruptly, the witch went pale, and her hand shook as she laid her wand back down. “Don’t do that,” she whispered. “It’s
awful, the way that you’re looking at me, as though you can peel back my skin and see every secret in my head.” She began
to shake, and brought up her hands to cover her face.

Harry blinked. Perhaps he had looked more ferocious than he anticipated. He shook his head, once, and turned his back on
her, catching Snape’s gaze. He nodded, and they made for the lifts.

“IT should never have gone this far,” Snape hissed, as they waited for a lift to come. “To forbid you from speaking to snakes?
It is madness.”

Harry closed his eyes, and entertained himself for a moment by imagining what Sylarana would have had to say if she was
still there and he’d tried to remain silent around her. That thought helped him dispel some of the anger. He opened his eyes
and said lightly, “Yes, and sudden, too. I think we’re going to stop by the second floor on the way out. I’d like to speak to
Rufus Scrimgeour and found out how it got this bad this fast.”

Snape darted him a hard glance. “I thought we would return to Hogwarts,” he said. “It is dangerous to be outside the wards
for too long, Harry.”
“I know,” said Harry, with a sigh. “But I think I need to know. He didn’t warn me. Either he knew and we need to renegotiate the terms of our alliance, or he didn’t know, and that means that things happened with suspicious speed. Why? Why did they suddenly think they needed to fear Parselmouths, of all people, or Dark wizards who weren’t registered before?” He shook his head.

“They have always feared those more powerful than themselves,” Snape whispered. “There are times when I can understand the Dark Lord’s thinking.”

Harry suppressed a shudder. The comment carried him back to Rosier’s laughter last night, and his claim that Harry could become a Dark Lord even if he killed Voldemort. And there had been times when Harry used Dark magic, or was in the midst of it, and certainly felt the temptation to go further. He thought of Walpurgis Night, and how he’d danced there. That was the kind of celebration the Ministry would like to control, and no doubt eliminate.

But against that was the set of words that Scrimgeour had once spoken, with all the passion of true conviction. It was not fair for the powerful to rule the world and wizards of ordinary power to have no recourse. By keeping the Ministry a neutral, open, bickering place that no Lord could control, he hoped to give people that chance.

Harry made a small sound in his throat and shook his head. Just another thorny path to dance down.

The lift came, then, and Harry stepped into it, followed closely by Snape. Harry concentrated. He would have to come up with the right words to convince Scrimgeour he wasn’t just another Lord come to meddle in the Ministry. Sometimes, power was a burden as much as it was freedom.

*******

The Auror Office set Harry on edge. He could feel wards he couldn’t see quietly buzzing away in the background. He saw heads turning to follow him as Snape escorted him past individual Aurors’ desks, not necessarily because they could feel his magic, but because of the inherent suspicious nature their training seemed to give them. He could sense tension and unhappiness and grim, cold responsibility behind many of the faces around him, though that might have been caused at least partially by having to deal with paperwork.

They encountered an assistant outside Scrimgeour’s office, but for some reason, the instant he saw Harry, he widened his eyes and nodded to the door behind him. “Go right on in,” he said. “He’s been expecting you. He told me that I’d recognize you on sight, and I must say, he was right.” He started grinning, a grin that didn’t falter even when Snape glared at him.

Harry shook his head in confusion and made his way into Scrimgeour’s office. How had Scrimgeour actually known that Harry would want to visit him? And why would he have been talking to other people about him?

The office was smaller than Harry would have thought it would be for the Head of the Auror Office, but that might have been an effect of the numberless photographs on the walls. Harry stared around, a bit dazedly. He caught glimpses of houses, people, trees, streets, a map of what seemed to be the Ministry, a few pictures of Hogwarts, scenes which seemed to be arrests, the soft, goofy visage of Minister Fudge, and too many others to really see.

“Harry. Come in.”

Harry turned around. In the center of all the photos was a desk—two desks, really, facing each other. Scrimgeour sat behind the first one, his yellow eyes calm and direct. Behind the other one, scratching frantically at a sheet of parchment that looked longer than he was tall, was Percy Weasley.

Harry stared at Scrimgeour. The Auror raised his impressive eyebrows and gestured once at Percy. “Ah yes, I forgot that you would already know Mr. Weasley. You were at the same school, after all, though not in the same House. This is more a re-acquaintance than a reintroduction, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harry muttered, even more confused. He had thought Percy was working in a department that checked on the thickness of cauldron bottoms, not for the Head Auror. Percy jerked his head up, gave Harry one single, eloquent, harassed glance, and then turned back to his sheet of parchment.

“Mr. Weasley’s helping me with a case I’m working on,” said Scrimgeour expansively. “Perfect for someone of his talents.” He gave Harry a slow wink.
Harry shook his head slightly, but felt a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He’d warned Scrimgeour about Percy entering the Ministry as a spy for Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix. He had thought the Auror would simply keep an eye on him, but it seemed as though Scrimgeour were more direct than that.

“You’re here to see me about the new edict, I suppose?” Scrimgeour went on, effortlessly steering the conversation. “Yes. Pesky thing. They just dropped the forms on my desk this morning.” He picked up the nearest sheaf of papers and rattled them. “Just how are we supposed to catch every Dark witch who does a minor love spell and doesn’t want to register that she does them, I ask you?”

“I was hoping you could tell me why it was passed with such—efficiency,” Harry said, deciding to take his cue from Scrimgeour. The Auror obviously didn’t mind Percy overhearing them, so Harry wouldn’t, either. “It really seems to have been hurried through the Wizengamot. And why does a Parselmouth need to register in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?” He made sure to inject a moderate amount of outrage into his voice. No one said that he couldn’t be angry about that in front of the right people.

He saw that he’d startled Scrimgeour. The Auror sat up and leaned forward. “You registered there?” he asked.

Harry nodded. “I take it no one else is?”

Scrimgeour closed his eyes. “It would hardly matter if they were,” he murmured. “Someone could always say it’s just because there are no other Parselmouths in Britain.”

“Or, at least, none fool enough to come in and register,” said Snape tartly, unable to keep silent any longer.

“I didn’t complete the registration,” said Harry, deciding it was important to be honest. His alliance with Scrimgeour was based on an exchange of information, and before anything else, Scrimgeour was an Auror, bound to enforce wizarding law. If Harry didn’t give him some room to maneuver between the lines, then he might have no choice but to arrest Harry for breaking the law at some point. “I didn’t sign the form that said I understood I would be subjected to all appropriate penalties if I spoke to snakes.”

Scrimgeour’s eyes opened. Harry stared in fascination. He’d seen this transformation only once before, the first time he met Scrimgeour. The man tended to be detached and amused the rest of the time, but here, here was the intensity that had showed when he was telling Harry what he believed the Ministry was and could be.

“That,” said Scrimgeour, his voice clear and quiet, “was not part of any other registration.”

Harry clenched his fists. “So a Dark witch who makes love spells doesn’t have to stop making them?” he asked.

Scrimgeour shook his head. “How could we stop that, when love potions are legal to sell? No, she would agree to register that she made them and where she lived and so on, so that if a crime involving love spells happened, we would have a handy list of suspects—excuse me, people who would help us with our inquiries.” He fixed his eyes on Harry again. “But not this. I didn’t know that they would say you couldn’t use your talent at all.”

Harry stood quiet, thinking. If not for the date on Umbridge’s letter, he would have thought the registration was targeted at him because of his exploits at the Quidditch World Cup, but she’d written the letter before that happened.

_That doesn’t mean the registration was not targeted at you_, a quiet voice told him, not Regulus, from whom he hadn’t heard this morning, but the most Slytherin part of his brain. _It still could be. At the very least, the idea that they don’t want you speaking Parseltongue, while they’re just keeping an eye on other Dark talents, suggests it._

But why? Parseltongue had been considered Dark ever since Slytherin’s day, from what Harry understood, because of what had ended up happening with him, but it was not such a powerful gift that the Ministry would act to prevent anyone from using it. It wasn’t as though Harry could command armies of snakes to attack anyone.

The voice had an answer for that, too. _The Parseltongue is a convenient excuse. It’s your power that they want to control. The rumors have had months to build, now, and how many people might have felt the burst of magic that alerted the Death Eaters to where Lux Aeterna was? They’re getting nervous. If you can be seen as coming in publicly and cooperating with the Ministry, they can look as if they have you on a leash, rather than as if you’re setting yourself up as an independent Lord._

Harry curled his lip in a silent snarl. He didn’t think that powerful wizards should rule over those less strong, no, but he did object to the thought of the less powerful controlling _him_. He was a weapon and a sacrifice, but he chose who to defend and
where to sacrifice himself. The Ministry hadn’t even done him the courtesy of approaching openly. Already, Harry was regretting that he had come in and appeared to obey the law.

Yet what else could he have done? He was hardly prepared to take on the whole of the Ministry by himself.

He opened his eyes and met Scrimgeour’s gaze again. “I may use it,” he said, “if only to save people’s lives.”

“And I may arrest you,” said Scrimgeour, as carefully, “if only to please people’s eyes.”

Harry nodded sharply, understanding. There were things Scrimgeour could not do and rules he would not break, but he might be able to ease the process of Harry’s arrest or fine should it come to that. At least they both understood each other, now.

He looked once at Percy Weasley, but Scrimgeour did not volunteer any spontaneous explanation of what he was doing there, so Harry shrugged it away. “I’ll see you later, Auror Scrimgeour,” he said.

“And I will see you later, Mr. Potter,” said Scrimgeour, equally formal. “Of that, I have no doubt at all.”

Harry gave him a smile without humor and walked out of the office. As Snape had said, they really should get behind Hogwarts’s wards.

His mind was spinning, though, reaching out, gathering up threads and seeing what connections he could braid out of them, which ones would benefit both him and his allies.

******

Snape followed quietly in Harry’s wake. It appeared as though he wouldn’t have to hex people after all, nor talk to his ward about the possible implications of a law that forbade only Parselmouths—effectively, only one wizard in Britain—to use their Dark talents.

Harry had figured that out for himself. Snape, thanks to the potion that he’d given Harry this morning, could feel his mind racing, picking and sorting through the implications, rejecting some and embracing others, though he could not read the substance of those thoughts.

Snape had brewed the potion last night, first in a series of stopgap solutions to Harry’s self-sacrificial nature that he intended to make permanent. It had awakened Harry, yes, but it also gave Snape a passive link to him—one that would warn him when Harry was in danger, tell him where he was if Snape concentrated, and let him feel the general state of Harry’s mind and emotions. It would not place any barriers on him. Harry could still go where he liked and do what he pleased, which he inevitably would anyway. But Snape could at least be at his right shoulder, should it become necessary.

Watching his ward stride ahead of him, Snape thought that it might not be as necessary as he believed.

He is opening his eyes. He sees much more of the world around him than he did when he first came to Hogwarts.

Now, if I can get him to see himself, too, we may be able to win true victories.

Snape smirked, and felt the stirring of long-hidden ambitions reviving in him again, hatching like dragons.

This is not about just victory over James or Gryffindor any more, if it ever was. This is about winning in general, and winning the future.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*

Chapter Seven: Who Speaks to the Many?

“I promise you, Harry, I had nothing to do with this.”

Harry squinted at Albus, who hid his sigh and stifled his instinctive temptation to read the boy’s mind. They had been in his office for the past ten minutes, and it seemed that no matter how much he denied having anything to do with Fudge’s new edicts, Harry would not believe him. He kept trying new and subtler ways of questioning, as though he believed those would pull the truth from Albus at last.
While Albus waited for the next one, he studied what the summer had made of the boy. Harry had grown a bit taller. That was the most obvious and banal of the changes, however. His eyes were steadier, more direct, and he carried himself as though he might have some purpose in life outside of staying in the shadows. Albus had already concluded that his first plan to handle the boy would not work. He would have to try others.

At least Severus had agreed to let them meet alone. There was that. Harry had a fragile trust in Albus, while Severus had none at all, anymore.

*And whose fault is that?*

Albus winced. He’d grown used to living with that voice during the summer, but he did not like it. It asked him useless questions whose answers he already knew, and prompted him to think of regrets that he had long ago put aside. He had no time to think of them. Merlin knew his days were already full of the here-and-now consequences of his actions.

Harry seemed to have decided the direct approach was best after all. “But you’re the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot,” he said. “Fudge couldn’t have passed this edict against Dark wizards without your help.”

Albus sighed. “He could and he did, Harry,” he said, and picked up the book that had been resting on a corner of his desk, with one of Fawkes’s shed feathers serving as a bookmark. He handed it to Harry and waited in silence as the boy read, while staring at the old perch on the other side of the room. He missed Fawkes. He wished the phoenix would visit him at least some of the time, but that seemed against whatever decision as to allegiance that Fawkes had made.

Harry looked back up, his face ashen. “He thinks we’re at war?” he croaked.

Albus nodded. “Yes. ‘The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot may be displaced or set aside in times of war, when the Minister must make a decision with the help of his loyal supporters,’ and that’s quoting from memory, Harry. I must admit, there are times when it’s a sensible precaution. The law came into being during the War with Grindelwald, when the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot turned out to have been one of the Dark Lord’s Lightning Guard.” Albus grimaced. The trial of Beowulf Guile was not one that he liked to remember. “But this time, Fudge has been receiving reports of Dark activity that I think are exaggerated and multiplied beyond all count. He has not claimed that Voldemort has returned, not yet. That would require an official recognition of a Dark Lord, and thus an enemy, by the Ministry. But he may think another Dark Lord is on the rise, and that means that he can convince a good portion of the Wizengamot to obey him.” Albus sighed. “He did not even attempt to show me the proof of this. He simply bypassed me. I think he knows he could not convince me.”

Harry nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed. “That means that he could pass other laws,” he said. “Doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Albus, and waited. The boy obviously had other questions to ask him.

Harry closed his eyes and sat very still for a moment. Albus felt the shimmer of magic climbing around him, intoxicating and pulling—or at least it would have been if he wasn’t defended by his own, old, settled power. Harry’s magic had not strengthened, but it seemed to have deepened, as though he were learning better control. Albus sincerely hoped so, for both the boy’s sake and the sake of the wizarding world.

“They could hurt my allies,” Harry whispered.

Albus’s eyebrows rose. “Of course, the anti-werewolf edicts have already hurt Remus—“ he began.

Harry opened his eyes and shook his head. “Not just those allies, sir. The allies that you promised you wouldn’t interfere with, former Death Eaters and Dark wizards.” He flexed one hand as though already anticipating it would hurt from the letters he had to write. “I have to warn them.”

Albus checked his desire to say something. Harry was due for some bad experiences with the former Death Eaters and the Dark wizards, he suspected. He wished he could say something to ease Harry into the experience, but the boy would not believe him anyway. He had a tremendous capacity to forgive and forget.

*Too tremendous,* Albus thought. *We trained him too well, Lily and I.*

He started in the next instant, and banished the thoughts again. He simply had no *time* for regrets.

Harry nodded to him and stood. “Thank you, sir, for letting me know that magical Britain is essentially under martial law at the moment,” he murmured, and then turned and strode from the room.
Albus sighed and turned to another of his tasks, not letting his mind linger for long on Harry. The boy was perhaps the most essential wizard in the world at the moment, outranking even his brother, whose training was, by all accounts, going well. But there were problems Albus had to settle that had nothing to do with him, and one that could, as yet, have nothing to do with him.

He picked up three letters, one from France, one from Bulgaria, and one from Godric’s Hollow, and sat back to consider how best to respond to them.

******

Harry whispered the password to Snape’s door—he’d had to ask his mentor to change it several times before they found one that did not refer to one of Harry’s family members in an unflattering way—and opened it, just in time to find Snape receiving a Howler. The Potions Master sat behind his desk, marking essays and looking thoroughly unimpressed, while the red envelope hovered above his desk and screamed at him.

“—AND I THOUGHT IT WAS MY MOTHER’S DECREES AT FIRST, AND NOW I FIND OUT THAT IT’S YOURS! DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I WANTED TO SEE HARRY AGAIN, BEFORE SCHOOL STARTED? AND HOW MUCH HE WANTED TO SEE ME? WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE TO TELL HIM THAT HE CAN’T HAVE VISITORS? HE SAVED EVERYBODY FROM A DEATH EATER! ISN’T THAT ENOUGH TO WIN YOUR APPROVAL?”

Harry covered his face with one hand. He supposed he’d been foolish to think that a week of calm letters from Draco meant that there would be no more explosive response sooner or later.

The Howler fell to Snape’s desk. Snape finished writing the line he’d started, then drew out his wand, murmured, “Incendio,” and burned the envelope to a crisp before he looked up.

“Harry,” he said evenly. “I trust that your meeting with Albus went well.”

Harry rolled his eyes. He’d insisted on going alone to speak to Dumbledore, and it still had taken him almost a week to get that agreement out of Snape. Now he had to stand there while Snape used gentle Legilimency on him to find out if the Headmaster had left another web in his mind. His mentor sat back at last, with a nod, and said, “Your mind is clear. Now. I must ask again if you are sure about this expedition.”

Harry folded his arms. “Unless you want me to not have the books and cauldrons and robes I need for the new term, then yes.”

“I could firecall an associate of mine who often shops in Diagon Alley, and have her retrieve your new belongings for you,” said Snape, an offer he’d made before.

Harry shook his head. His summer at Lux Aeterna had at least addicted him to one thing, he thought: the feel of open space in front of him and the sky above his head. It hadn’t been bad during the first few weeks of August, since he could go outside as long as he didn’t go too far from the castle, but for the last week, Snape had kept him behind the wards. Students arrived tomorrow, and he wouldn’t have much excuse to leave again unless he went flying or to Hogsmeade, and Harry wasn’t sure that Snape would allow that, either. “I want to go to Diagon Alley myself.”

Snape sighed. “Very well.” He stood, cast a Summoning Charm on his cloak, and gave Harry a critical glance. “We will get there soon enough,” he said. “It is not yet noon. You need not be so impatient.”

Harry blinked. He had his arms folded, but he wasn’t tapping a foot or sighing or looking at the clock. He hadn’t thought that he looked so impatient. “What?”

Snape narrowed his eyes as though surprised by something, and gestured. “Precede me to the Floo, please, Mr. Potter.”

Harry rolled his eyes. His last name usually meant he’d done something wrong, but in this case, he had no idea what that could be. He paused to grab his own cloak from his bedroom. With any luck, if anyone recognized him from Skeeter’s newspaper articles, he could use the hood to shield his face.

******
Harry threw his head back and breathed out comfortably. They had arrived via Floo at the Leaky Cauldron, and from there, Snape had guided him back into Diagon Alley. The sight around him was exactly what Harry had wanted. Fresh air, blue sky—he supposed the day Snape had taken him to London hadn’t been the last sunny day of August, after all—people moving around him who weren’t cheering hysterically or running in fear. He could feel an agitation he’d barely been aware was there dying in his stomach.

“Come, Harry. James said he had set up a separate account for you at Gringotts, I take it?”

Harry nodded. Snape would say nothing about the rest of the contents of that letter if he would say nothing, he supposed. The rest of the letter from James had warned Snape against trying to touch the money in Harry’s account. Harry winced at the very memory. Sometimes his father reminded him of nothing so much as a more immature Draco making comments on how little money the Weasleys had.

“This way,” said Snape, and guided Harry down the Alley.

They received a few stares as they walked, but not many. Harry relaxed by degrees. Probably people were staring absently, in the fashion of someone who knew they were supposed to recognize someone else, but couldn’t quite do it. Of course, Skeeter’s last article about him had been four days ago, and he had his magic even more tightly shielded than normal.

“They’re staring anyway,” Regulus said, his voice abruptly appearing in Harry’s head. *They must sense something about you, but I think most of them can’t tell what it is. That doesn’t mean you won’t trouble their dreams, later.*

*How comforting.* Harry snorted.

*Teaching you a lesson,* said Regulus. *You seem to have settled back down, thank Merlin. Are you sorry for what you did?*

Harry sighed as they passed Flourish and Blotts. *The unnecessary part,* yes. *But I can’t be sorry for dissipating the curse, or facing Rosier and keeping him occupied when he could have hurt someone else.*

Regulus snorted back at him. *Have you given thought to how you might help me get my body back?*

Harry threw up his hands, causing Snape to glance at him. Harry resolved to keep his gestures under control from now on.

*I’ve tried! But when all you can tell me is “small space” and “darkness,” that doesn’t help much. I told you what I think the best chance would be.*

*And I told you why it wouldn’t work.* Regulus sounded sulky. *I don’t have perfect control of the wards, not when I can’t see them. I was able to shut Bellatrix out of the Black estates she’d been hiding in, but I can’t open the wards for one person and not another. I just don’t have that fine a control. If I opened them to Narcissa so that she could come in and search about, Bellatrix could get in, too.*

Harry shook his head. *You’ll have to take a risk, sooner or later, if you want to be back in your body.* He thought Regulus was probably imprisoned somewhere in one of the Black estates. It would explain why none of the Death Eaters had ever found the body, and why the wards had slammed shut immediately when Sirius died and the heirship transferred to Regulus; they were protecting their new master. Harry also thought it was the sort of thing that would appeal to Voldemort, since the locket that had contained a part of his soul had also reposed somewhere among the Black treasures.

*Although…come to think of it, he can’t have known about that, or he would have taken his locket back.*

*Listen,* Regulus interrupted his musings. *I don’t want to be found by Bellatrix. That would be horrible.*

*I agree, it would be,* Harry said. *But if you are in a Black house, and you don’t let the wards relax for someone who’s friendly to you, then you’ll never be found at all.*

Regulus sighed at him. *I would find it reassuring if you were on hand when the wards fell, so that you could come in immediately and search.*

Harry raised his eyebrows. *You saw what happened the last time you tried to convince Snape that I should be able to leave Hogwarts and search for you.* Snape had driven Regulus from his mind with a judicious combination of Occlumency and a defense spell that he still hadn’t taught Harry, but which had left Regulus whimpering in pain for hours afterward.

Regulus sighed again. *I know.*
Harry shook his head once more, and then they were at Gringotts. Harry had been there, but not for over a year, and he had forgotten how imposing it was. The white marble glittered and flashed in the sun, sometimes too bright to look at. The bronze doors weren’t much better, and the uniform of the goblin who stood in front of those outer doors seemed to have been made by a former Gryffindor who wanted to outdo the garish combination of red and gold in the House’s common room.

Harry met the goblin’s eyes as they walked up the steps and towards the doors. This was a southern goblin, and so different from the northern ones. For one thing, his skin was darker, his eyes, as they fixed on Harry, were dark and slanted, and he appeared to have no claws and only five fingers on each hand when Harry was close.

It wasn’t until they reached the actual front doors that Harry realized the goblin was studying him back, his eyes gone into even smaller slits as they narrowed. He didn’t say anything, however, and so Harry simply nodded to him and passed into the antechamber beyond, where he and Snape would have to go through a pair of silver doors engraved with the goblins’ curse on thieves.

Harry’s skin began to tingle the moment he stepped into the antechamber. He blinked and looked behind the world again, wondering if he would see a web here. He was somewhat puzzled when he did not.

Then he glanced from side to side, and saw glittering white strands running on either side of him. He couldn’t see the web because he stood in the middle of it. He sighed. Of course this one would be especially strict, since after all these goblins are guarding the money of the wizarding world.

“Come, Harry,” said Snape again, and steered him forward. Harry kept his eyes open and his sight focused on the web, though, which made for a mixed sight of afterimages, goblins, and wizards in the room beyond. Now and then he stumbled, but Snape’s firm hand on his shoulder held him steady.

They approached a bored-looking goblin behind the counter, who sat up slightly on seeing them. “Welcome to Gringotts,” he said, with such practiced polish that Harry wondered how anyone ever heard sincerity in it. “My name is Flashkack. Your name and business?”

“Harry Potter,” said Harry as calmly as he could. The web was growing brighter around him, or at least the strand of white light immediately in front of him was. He didn’t understand why, and had to strive to hold his voice under control. “I’ve come about an account that my father, James Potter, established for me from his vault.”

Flashkack didn’t say anything for a long moment, simply and steadily staring at him. Harry blinked, his eyes watering with tears from the web. He’d never seen any other behave like this, and wondered what was going on.

Of course, I still have a lot to learn about being vates, he reminded himself.

“Of course,” the goblin murmured at last, and abruptly the brilliant strand of the web calmed down to what it had been. “Here is your key, sir.” He passed the key to the vault over with one hand. Harry took it, and felt a faint stir of magic where their fingers touched. Flashkack once more stared intently at him, then said, “I will take you to your vault myself, sir.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you. We would be grateful.” He heard Snape’s slight snarl behind him, and suspected the man was not thrilled at the thought of riding one of the carts down to the vault. Harry ignored him. Flashkack’s eyes wouldn’t have let him go at the moment, either.

“May I invite you,” Flashkack said suddenly, his voice rough and low, “to attend a certain meeting in one of the back rooms when you are done with the vault?”

Harry felt his heart pound once, as though in answer to the unusual voice. “I accept,” he said, without thinking about the consequences.

“Harry,” said Snape, his voice a pace or two away from a growl.

Harry cast him an impatient glance. “My guardian can come with me, I take it?” he asked Flashkack.

“As long as he promises not to behave like a wizard, of course,” said Flashkack.

Harry winced slightly. From the context, “like a wizard” obviously meant “rudely and arrogantly.” “I’ll stand surety for him myself if he does, in the name of blood and stone,” he said. He was lost when it came to northern goblin courtesies, but he
knew the southern ones fairly well.

Flashkack cocked his head, and something like a smile touched his solemn face. “I accept, in the name of silver and bronze.” He gestured towards one of the guarded doors on the far side of the room. “This way, sir. Your vault awaits.”

*******

Harry glanced once around the room, taking in the large number of goblins standing around the walls, and then fixed his gaze solely on the table in front of him. It had two chairs. Harry and Snape would sit there, while the goblins remained on their feet around them.

Harry calmed his breathing, his desire to lash out, and his instinctive certainty that they were being made to sit like this so that their heads were lower than the goblins’. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t coming to this meeting as some kind of conqueror, anyway, but as a potential vates interested in hearing what the goblins had to say.

He heard Snape drawing in breath for some kind of vitriolic comment, and reached up, squeezing his mentor’s arm. He made sure it was the left arm, and that his hand covered the Dark Mark. Snape let out his breath without speaking. Harry nodded to Flashkack, who had served as their escort, and took his seat.

He realized abruptly that the white web, though still present and shining around them when he looked, was dimmer here than elsewhere. Before he could think better of it, he murmured aloud, “It isn’t as bright.”

One of the goblins near the wall gave a harsh sound that might have been a laugh, and took a step forward. Harry saw how the heads all around the room swung to him, orienting on him—no, Harry decided as the goblin came a step or two forward, her. There was something about the shape of her face and the way she carried herself that was different from Flashkack, whom Harry was certain was male.

“No,” she said. “And do you know why, vates?”

Harry shook his head. He was afraid for Snape beside him, strung tight as a crossbow. He once again tried to reach out and soothe him through touch, but this time he didn’t know if he succeeded. “Please, tell me why.”

“Because no money is exchanged here,” said the goblin, standing with one foot set in front of the other as she stared at him. “No keys to vaults are given.” She smiled, her grin a nightmare of jagged teeth. “The web is tied to the business of the bank itself, and reinforced each time wizards take or add to the wealth they have stolen from us.”

Harry shuddered. The words again spilled from his lips before he could stop them. “Who did that?”

“Ah,” said the goblin, a bare breath. Her eyes hadn’t blinked, Harry realized suddenly, and she had never looked away from him, either. It was like being caught on a stone drill. “Most of the magical creatures have no answer for that. But in our case, we do. We did work as equal partners with wizards until we refused to give a certain one a certain treasure he wanted. He took it anyway, and spun the web to make it so that each exchange thereafter would strengthen the bonds upon us. His name was Salazar Slytherin.”

Harry felt Snape jerk. “He never did anything of the kind,” the Head of Slytherin snapped. “He was a Dark wizard, there is no denying that, but he had no need to steal treasure from goblins or weave webs. You are lying.”

The reaction was instantaneous. Several goblins around the walls lifted their hands, and Harry saw that they held bows like the northern goblins had, save that their arrows did not shine white, but silver. Harry felt the hum coming from those arrows. He didn’t recognize the magic, but he doubted it would be good for Snape if the bolts hit him anywhere on his body.

The female goblin turned her head, by slow degrees, to look at Snape. She seemed amused more than anything, Harry thought, at least if he was reading the wrinkles that ran around her dark eyes correctly. “You would call the hanarz of the goblins of Gringotts a liar, to her face?” she asked.

Harry winced. Remembering how much the northern goblins had valued honesty, he had some guess as to the depth of the insult Snape had just given the hanarz. “Please, forgive him,” he said, making sure not to start to his feet or get in between Snape and the arrows, though he wanted to. “He is completely unfamiliar with all this, and he is the Head of the House that Salazar Slytherin established at Hogwarts. He thinks he is speaking the truth.”

“Speaking the truth does not always involve calling others liars, Harry Potter,” the hanarz murmured. “Would you not
agree?”

Harry nodded unwillingly.

“And you have some idea of how much honesty means to us?”

Harry had to nod again.

“Then tell me,” said the hanarz, tone distant and detached, as though confronting an intellectual problem, “why should he not die?”

Harry raised his eyebrows. Well, they value honesty. “If you kill him,” he said, “then I will not help you, and will more than likely kill many of you in turn, in my explosion of rage. I love him, and even though he’s an idiot sometimes, I won’t suffer you to touch him.”

The hanarz considered him in silence. Then she nodded once, and the bows along the walls lowered. Harry sat back, and became aware of Snape’s harsh breathing next to him. He didn’t turn and ask his mentor how he was. It was obvious how he was—angry and terrified almost witless. Harry hoped the meeting wouldn’t last long pat this moment. Snape always started saying unfortunate things when he was this upset.

“Well spoken,” said the hanarz. “Now, tell me what you plan to do about our web, little vates.”

Harry considered her. “I would have to close the bank to dissipate the web, wouldn’t I?”

“Stop the exchange of money, more than likely,” the goblin said, not sounding at all bothered.

Harry nodded. “And that, of course, would destroy one of the pillars of wizarding society,” he said.

The hanarz said nothing, simply watched him expectantly. Harry stared into her eyes and found he could ignore the eyes of the watching goblins. They followed and obeyed her so deeply that hers was the only stare that mattered.

He took a deep breath. “I can’t destroy it right now, any more than I can destroy the linchpins that hold your northern cousins captive,” he began.

“But!” the hanarz prompted, instead of getting angry as Harry had expected, a faint smile touching her lips. Harry revised his opinion of her cleverness upwards. Perhaps she had never intended to kill Snape, after all, or had at least been smart enough to know what would happen if she did.

“I can promise to try,” said Harry softly.

The hanarz nodded once. “You swear it by blood and stone, by silver and bronze?”

“More,” said Harry. This is where my education comes in handy. “I swear it by gold.”

The murmur of voices around him began again, and the hanarz stepped back to rest against the wall. Flashkack came forward to escort them out of the room. Harry stood up gratefully, stretching tense muscles and praying that Snape would keep quiet until they were safely out. Luckily, he did.

Of course, his first words once they were navigating their tunnel back towards the cart that had brought them here were, “I suppose that promise was worth so little that they immediately had to let us go, without even a farewell?”

“Wrong, wizard,” said Flashkack, turning around to meet Snape’s eyes. “That promise is worth so much that we need ask nothing else of Mr. Potter. He will keep his oath.”

Harry kept his eyes fixed on the tunnel ahead, and tried not to hear Snape’s murmuring or feel the goblin’s speculative glance. He was winding himself up in more and more complications, but he’d always suspected that would happen. Life wasn’t simple, nor easy.

******
Harry glanced around uneasily. It wasn’t that he didn’t know about Dark magic, he told himself. He’d practiced it, for Merlin’s sake.

But there was something about Knockturn Alley that made him nervous anyway. Perhaps it was the air of sordid, petty transactions that took place here, Harry thought, shying away from a witch who stepped out of a shop so heavily curtained that Harry could make out nothing of what it sold. He knew some Dark magic, yes, and the deep, wild darkness that had come and danced with him on Walpurgis Night. He knew little of the darkness that poverty and desperation could drive one to.

The witch shuffled past him, gave a dry, rattling cough, and fumbled open the handkerchief she held, scooping up a handful of gray powder to rub on her face. A look of ecstasy overcame her features. Harry had to look away.

“This way.”

Snape swept out of the apothecary shop, to Harry’s relief, and led him towards the entrance to Knockturn Alley. He’d insisted on Harry staying within his sight, his cloak pulled up, but hadn’t let him enter the shop. Now, from the way he strode, he was obviously determined to leave.

Harry hadn’t gone far, though, when the force that evidently delighted in making his life hard decided to do it again.

Two men had been carrying a crate from one shop to another, their hands obviously trembling under its weight. They were passing directly in front of Harry and Snape when they dropped the crate, and it cracked open, wood splinters flying in several directions. Harry ducked them.

Almost at once, there was a horrible hissing.

The men screamed. Harry lowered his hand from his face to see snakes swarming over them, small, lithe green-and-gold bodies moving with astonishing quickness, concentrating in one place and biting again and gain. One of the wizards convulsed and went down. The other managed to keep his feet, but from the glazed look in his eyes, it wouldn’t be long before he succumbed to the venom.

Acting on instinct, Harry took a step forward. “Stop!” he called out, and from the jerk Snape gave beside him, knew it had been in Parseltongue.

And the snakes all stopped, as one, their bodies reacting like the body of the artificial snake from the Black treasuries who had attacked Draco last year. Then their heads swung to face him, also all as one, and a hissing eddied among them, forming into words that seemed to emerge at last from one serpent in the center of the pile.

“Who speaks to the Quiver? Who speaks to the Many?”

Harry swallowed. He was aware that he had a small crowd, people leaning out of shops to watch, but he couldn’t concentrate on that in the face of the information he’d just received. The Many were hive cobras, a type of magical snake from South Africa. They were extremely difficult to kill, since they were essentially one mind in many bodies, and killing one small body would just result in the mind passing to another host. They could bite and inject venom into a victim that would kill as it was reinforced again and again from multiple mouths, or spit their poison into their victim’s eyes. One book Harry had read even suggested they could possess wizards, if they really tried. Out of control, they would be more than a menace.

He had an opportunity to stop that from happening, and it was more than enough. “I do,” he said, taking a step forward just so that he wouldn’t accidentally see any wizards from the corner of his eye and speak in English. “I am a Parselmouth, and I ask that you please stop attacking those wizards.”

“One is dead, Parselmouth,” said the eddying hiss. “And they seized us from our warm den and brought us here, cutting the Many in half. They intended to cut us and mash us and use our eggs. Why should we spare them?”

Harry swallowed. “I suppose you don’t have any reason to,” he said. “But I ask you to.”

“And the other people, too?” There was a mocking tone to the voices now. “Shall the Many refrain from attacking other people, because you ask us to?”

“Eventually, you have to know that they’ll kill you,” said Harry. “You can’t make your way back home from here; it’s too far away. Hunters will come, and they’ll kill you. I can spare the Many’s life.”
There was a long silence, and then all the snakes left the dead wizards and made for him as one. They moved incredibly fast, and smoothly dodged the hex that Snape fired at them.

Harry forced himself to stand still as the snakes swarmed up his body, wrapping around his arms and his chest and his legs. One draped around his neck, and held its body in front of his face, swaying. Harry could see the hood expanding around its neck, and the marking on it, turned to delicate green and gold by the light behind it—the infinity symbol, eternity or death. The cobra’s eyes were gold. It could spit into his eyes, and he would be permanently blinded. There was no cure for that kind of blindness that anyone knew of, magical or Muggle, though the Many’s ordinary bites could be cured.

Harry held the cobra’s eyes and waited.

The hiss once more built into a single voice. “What would you give the Quiver, Parselmouth?”

“There is a sanctuary,” said Harry carefully. “A forest in the place where I live, where many magical creatures live and run free of interference from wizards. I will take you there, and set you free. It is not the Many’s natural home, but it may begin a new one.”

There was a long silence, unless one counted the sound of scales scraping on and over him. Harry breathed shallowly. He was sure that Snape was staring at him in horror, but he couldn’t look up and see if that was true. He could see only the cobra right in front of his face, swaying back and forth, back and forth.

It occurred to him that it might be the last thing he ever saw.

“And if hunters come after the Many even there?” they hissed then. “They may. They came after us in our warm den very far from wizards. Will you defend us?”

Harry set himself. He was a Parselmouth, the only kind of wizard who could speak to these creatures, and he had a duty that no other kind of wizard in this situation could have. “I will.”

The Many slithered back and forth over him. Harry realized then that they were actually moving in a pattern, the snakes at the upper right side of his chest sliding slowly down to the left and then twining around his legs, while other snakes crawled over his back and shoulders and upwards. Only the one in front of his face did not alter its position.

“We accept.”

Harry let out a short breath, then turned his head, carefully, to look at Snape. His mentor’s face was furious again, but that was no surprise.

“I’m going to Apparate now,” said Harry quietly. “I don’t think it would be a good idea to go by Portkey or Floo. I swear that I’m only going to Hogsmeade, and nowhere else.”

Snape snapped his head down. “I will be behind you,” he said.

Harry nodded, gathered his strength around him, and Apparated.

******

Harry watched as the Many flowed away from him into the Forbidden Forest, a tide of green and gold, and sighed. He straightened, shaking his hands, and then turned to face Snape, who had followed him every step of the way from Hogsmeade.

“I couldn’t think of anything else to do,” he said.

Snape simply watched him, face blank. Harry had no way of telling what he was thinking. He opened his mouth to defend himself again, and was interrupted by a deep, confident voice that skimmed out from behind him.

“Mr. Potter?”

Harry turned swiftly. Two tall wizards in gray cloaks were walking towards him from the direction of Hogsmeade. One of them held a scroll in front of him, from which he read as they halted a few feet from Harry.
'Mr. Harry Potter, you have today committed two crimes,” he said. “One is use of your Parseltongue skills, a forbidden Dark talent under Ministry Edict 6.8.0. The other is failure to complete your registration as a Parselmouth, and therefore desire to hide your Dark magic from others.” He lowered the scroll, and he and the other wizard both drew their wands. Harry couldn’t see their faces under their low cloak hoods, but he knew from the wizard’s voice that he was smiling. “You will come with us now. We will escort you to Minister Fudge.”

Harry stiffened his shoulders. “And you are?” he asked.

“Oh, we have an official title,” said the wizard who hadn’t spoken so far yet, “but I can never remember it. Call us the Hounds. We sniff after Dark magic.”

Harry sighed. One glance at Snape showed him an inch from exploding. Harry shook his head. “My guardian can come with me?” he asked, as he started divesting himself of the shrunken packages he’d got in Diagon Alley. There was no reason to take them with him.

“Ah,” said the wizard who’d read the scroll. “Of course.” He stepped forward and gripped Harry’s shoulder. “I’m afraid not.” And then he went into Side Along Apparition, dragging Harry with him, cutting off Snape’s angry roar as they went.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eight: The Hounds

Harry came out of the Apparition with his stomach jolting, but with Regulus whispering in his head, *You’re somewhere in the Ministry. One of the interrogation rooms. I recognize them from one time I was brought here.*

*There’s all sorts of interesting things that you haven’t told me about yourself, aren’t there?* Harry concentrated on the words to keep himself from panicking. He blinked, and blinked again, and looked around the room when it became obvious that the gray-cloaked wizards had simply released his arms and made no further attempt to confine him.

It was utterly blank, the walls made of gray stone, blocks without a visible join or seam between them. There were no photographs, portraits, or other decorations on them, and the only furniture was a chair behind him, which one of his captors promptly pushed him into. Harry felt his hands clench in anticipation of something, and it took him a moment to realize that it was a beating or a surprise attack. The walls and the chair were not natural.

And the wizards were not treating him like one normally would a feared prisoner. Harry glared at them.

One of them—Harry thought it was the one who had read the scroll out to him—chuckled. “Ooh, look, Grim, the kitten has claws!”

Grim, who was apparently the other wizard, laughed more loudly. He swept his hood back and revealed himself as a confident, handsome, young-looking man with blond hair and green eyes. Harry wouldn’t have given him a glance if they passed in Diagon Alley. “I’d say he does,” he responded. “Or, at least, fangs. You saw what he did in Knockturn, Crup.”

Crup made a sound of disgust beneath his breath and moved his hood back. He himself was brown-haired, but his brown eyes and his face were utterly ordinary. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“You were watching me in Knockturn Alley?” Harry asked. He filed away a few questions to ask for later, such as why they called themselves by the names of dogs. One of them had said something about being Hounds right before Apparating with Harry, but he didn’t know what that might mean.

“Of course,” said Crup. “Someone had to. You were a Parselmouth who refused to complete his registration, and then you went to the Auror Office and acted as though you knew the Head Auror. You’re interesting. When you went down Knockturn Alley, you only made yourself more interesting.” He gave a smile, and Harry saw his eyes go cold. “And then you spoke to snakes. Careless, Mr. Potter, very careless. If you wanted your Dark talent to remain secret, you shouldn’t have used it in public.”

Harry fought the temptation to bare his teeth. His best choice in these circumstances was still to remain silent and as polite as possible. He didn’t understand why they were so confident, since they seemed aware of his power, but that only made him
more cautious in return. Perhaps they had some advantage that would offset his magic.

“The last I knew, saving someone’s life was considered laudatory,” he said. “I convinced the Many to come with me to the Forbidden Forest, instead of attacking other people in Knockturn Alley.”

Crup laughed at him, throwing his head back and closing his eyes. His laughter did rather resemble a bark, reminding Harry of Sirius’s. “How would we know that, Mr. Potter? I saw two wizards fall dead of the Many’s bites, and then the snakes migrated to you. Then you fled from the alley like a criminal. Perhaps you commanded the snakes to stop attacking, but how would I know that? I don’t speak Parseltongue.”

“Shouldn’t it have been obvious?” Harry asked.

“No,” said Grim, his face gone dark. “You were caught using your foul creatures, and you might as well admit it, Dark wizard scum.”

Crup reached out and put a hand on his partner’s arm. “Grim,” he chided. “The boy isn’t even aware of why we, and not Aurors, brought him here yet. I think we should explain that first.” He faced Harry. “You heard the name Hounds. Do you have any idea what it means?”

Harry shook his head.

I don’t understand, Regulus whispered. I can almost see into his mind, which should mean that he has a connection with the Dark Lord, but I’m being blocked. There’s a wall of some kind. Do you think he’s a Legilimens?

I don’t know, Harry thought back.

“We are the ones who track down and sniff out evil,” said Crup, throwing his head back proudly. “We should know what darkness means. Some of us were former Aurors who got too close to our enemies. Others actually served as spies or messengers for the last Dark Lord. Some of us were simply naturally talented in the Dark Arts, but chose to serve the Ministry rather than act against the good of the wizarding world. We’re a good group, as good as you’ll find, but we follow the scent of evil. And that means we’re the perfect ones to enforce the Minister’s new edicts. The Aurors are often tiresome, with their paperwork and their legalities. What you need in a war is someone who can act quickly.”

“I’ve never heard of you,” said Harry, driving himself back to calmness again. “And I should have. I have studied history, and I would have noticed if there were Hounds running around and arresting criminals.”

Crup snorted. “That’s because we’re new, little kitten. The Minister needed us, and so he created us, drawing us from other departments.” He smiled at Harry. “You’re actually only the second person we’ve arrested. Don’t you feel special?”

“He didn’t announce your creation, either,” Harry persisted, trying to ignore the sick feeling in his stomach. “And he should have. There are laws saying that a new force like this should get news and press coverage.”

Grim sighed and pressed his hand over his heart. “Alas, we had to sacrifice that for the sake of doing our duty. The Minister decided we would be more effective if no one knew of us or our ultimate mission for a while.”

Harry tried to swallow. It was difficult with a dry throat. These are Fudge’s secret police, essentially. “And what is your ultimate mission?” he asked, working a note into his voice as if impressed, playing along.

“To get rid of all Dark magic in Britain.”

They answered together, and their voices were passionate and their eyes clear. Harry had no doubt this was something that mattered to them, beyond all the joking around that they had done. He shook his head, slowly, feeling a surge of pity for them.

“What’s the matter?” challenged Crup. “Don’t think we can do it, kitten?”

“No,” said Harry. “There are Dark artifacts hidden in manors all over Britain, and plenty of Dark wizards who hide their talents. How in the world are you going to find everyone who might do a spell you don’t approve of?” He was thinking of Connor, whose compulsion gift wasn’t common knowledge and could not be eradicated from his mind without breaking his mind. Would they make him sign a form saying that he would never use it again? Or would they take the chance of breaking him in order to make him something more “Light?”
“We’ll settle for getting rid of public practitioners first,” said Grim. “Like you.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t plan to stop using Parseltongue, particularly when I can use it to save lives.”

Crup surged to his feet. “That was all we were waiting for,” he said, and grabbed Harry’s shoulder, and dragged him forward.

Harry tensed, wanting to lash out, but then reminded himself that the Hounds were still within the boundaries of law as they knew them. He couldn’t strike and hurt someone who was only fulfilling his duty. He let Crup drag him into the next room.

*Harry*, said Regulus abruptly. *Are they wearing something around their necks?*

Harry managed to turn his head and squint up at Crup’s throat. *Yes*, he sent back. *A collar, it looks like, though I can’t see the whole thing, and made of silver. The quick glance he sent Grim confirmed that he wore what looked the same thing. I wonder if their resemblance to dogs really goes so far that they have to be chained to the wall at night?*

*Yes, I can see them now*, said Regulus. *That’s what’s keeping me out of their minds. How strange. I don’t know why they would want to block access to me, how they would even know about something like me.*

Harry was about to respond, but then he saw the face of the man sitting behind a desk across from him, and swallowed.

It was Minister Fudge; Harry knew that from every picture he’d seen in the *Daily Prophet*. The Minister normally looked plump and self-confident. Now, though, he wore the expression of a man haunted day and night by some heavy burden, and he stood up when he saw Harry and began toying with his hands. His eyes examined Harry intently, seeming to linger especially hard on the lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes, that’s him.”

Crup nodded. “Yes, sir. And he just said that he intended to keep using Parseltongue. If we let him free, he’ll go right back to practicing Dark magic.” He deposited Harry in a chair in front of the desk, which was large and made of polished mahogany. Harry tried to look around the room, but other than knowing it was larger than the interrogation room and colored red, he couldn’t see much. Crup kept hovering over him “I’ll give my word that I saw him practice it, sir, and of course Grim will back me up.”

“Of course,” said Grim. He took a position on the other side of the desk. Harry didn’t think it was a coincidence that the stance blocked Harry from having an easy path to the Minister.

*At least, it would block me from having an easy physical path to him. Harry let his lip curl in contempt. Who do they think I am? My magic could still reach him and blast the life out of him before they could move.*

He felt the temptation, once again, to simply do something like that, lash out and pin Fudge to the wall with his magic, as he’d once pinned Dumbledore and his brother. But Harry told himself he had to exercise control over his temper. He couldn’t simply go around attacking everyone he didn’t like. That wasn’t what a grown wizard did, and it was obvious he would have to be the adult here, since no one else was about to volunteer.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes, that’s him.”

Crup nodded. “Yes, sir. And he just said that he intended to keep using Parseltongue. If we let him free, he’ll go right back to practicing Dark magic.” He deposited Harry in a chair in front of the desk, which was large and made of polished mahogany. Harry tried to look around the room, but other than knowing it was larger than the interrogation room and colored red, he couldn’t see much. Crup kept hovering over him “I’ll give my word that I saw him practice it, sir, and of course Grim will back me up.”

“Of course,” said Grim. He took a position on the other side of the desk. Harry didn’t think it was a coincidence that the stance blocked Harry from having an easy path to the Minister.

*At least, it would block me from having an easy physical path to him. Harry let his lip curl in contempt. Who do they think I am? My magic could still reach him and blast the life out of him before they could move.*

He felt the temptation, once again, to simply do something like that, lash out and pin Fudge to the wall with his magic, as he’d once pinned Dumbledore and his brother. But Harry told himself he had to exercise control over his temper. He couldn’t simply go around attacking everyone he didn’t like. That wasn’t what a grown wizard did, and it was obvious he would have to be the adult here, since no one else was about to volunteer.

“Then,” said Fudge, bobbing his head, “the law is very clear.” He turned to Harry. “Mr. Potter, you understand why you’ve been brought here?”

Harry met his eyes and gave thanks for the deep, calm mask Lily had made him practice until it was natural. He could summon it back now, even though he’d spent so much time with Snape, who encouraged him to be more open, because he’d spent years on years living under it. “No, Minister,” he said. “I am sorry that my use of Parseltongue offended Mr. Grim and Mr. Crup, but I acted as I did to keep the Many from biting wizards in Knockturn and Diagon Alleys. I would argue that I broke the law in ignorance, not in malicious use of Dark magic.”

“Ignorance of the law is no excuse,” Fudge retorted, his eyes gleaming with triumph. “And it’s a convenient coincidence, isn’t it, that lately Dark potions have appeared on the market that use the eggs and scales of the Many in them? I suppose you’ll argue that you just happened to be able to gain control over the snakes, and that they just happened to appear in Knockturn Alley on a day you were there?”

“Any Parselmouth could have commanded the snakes, sir,” said Harry. Regulus’s muttering in the back of his head, about disrespect and what idiots they all were, wasn’t helping, so he decided to ignore it. “And I did not know about the Dark
potions. I’m sorry that they have been a trouble and a plague on your administration.” He decided that a little judicious flattery could not hurt. “I know that you’ve been doing your very best for all of us in wizarding Britain. You’ve done a remarkable job.” Especially considering that you’re soft enough that I would have expected you to crumple your first year in office. “I would hate to act against that or undermine it in any way.” He bowed his head slightly, as though contrite.

It worked, at least partially. He saw Fudge puff up and ran a proud hand down his chest. “Yes, well, I do my best,” he said, and coughed. Then his face darkened again. “And that means passing stricter laws against Dark wizards like yourself. Or would you argue with that?”

“Not at all, sir,” said Harry. His thoughts were spiky, his mind crystal clear. He didn’t think he could say or do much to soothe Fudge’s fears, but he hoped he could at least keep them from damaging him as much as they might. “Dark magic as the magic of compulsion could threaten the free wills of others, and I am against that.”

He was disconcerted when Fudge laughed. “Of course you are,” he said. “Since when have Dark Lords cared about the wills of others?”

Harry stared at him. “You think I’m a Dark Lord, sir?”

“Of course you are.” Fudge waved his hand. “Not as bad as—as You-Know-Who, of course, but you’re still rising. And we need to do all that we can to prevent that rise.” He launched into what Harry thought was probably a practiced speech. “We all did very poorly in the First War, of course, but that was because we weren’t prepared. This time, we know the signs to watch for.” He nodded to Grim, and the man scurried off to the other side of the room to fetch something made of paper, by the sounds of it. “This time, we won’t be caught with our trousers around our ankles!” He raised one hand and pointed a finger at Harry. “Even Dark Lords are subject to the rule of wizarding law, Mr. Potter!”

Harry hid his contempt as much as possible. He knew from the book that Hawthorn Parkinson had given him last year, on bindings, that that wasn’t true. Dark Lords and Light Lords usually ignored the bounds of law because they could afford to do so, though Light Lords sometimes made a pretense, like Dumbledore, of obeying the rules. But magical power had always been the ultimate trump card in those discussions. If Voldemort was standing here, of course he would not hesitate to use magic to fling the morons into walls.

But I am not a Dark Lord, Harry reminded himself. I am not any kind of Lord. That is why I am different from them. I’m not about to hurt innocent people who really think they are protecting the wizarding world.

He kept his voice calm, his face friendly and open. “What would it take to convince you that I’m not a Dark Lord, Minister?”

“You had a chance to do that already,” Fudge retorted regally, as Grim came up beside him, staggering under the weight of the large piece of paper. “We offered you a chance to register yourself like any other Dark wizard. You refused to do so.”

“I am sorry, sir,” said Harry, slightly narrowing his eyes. “I was told that my case was unique. No other Dark wizard was asked to actually stop using Dark magic. Instead, I was the only one.”

Fudge shook his head. “That is because you are a Dark Lord.”

Harry wondered if the Minister would know what circular logic was if it danced naked in front of him. “Sir—“

Grim managed to shake out the immense piece of parchment with a shout. Harry peered. It was a chart, he could make out that much, and carefully labeled with boxes in different colors, but he couldn’t tell what the words said; they were all inked carefully into place with miniscule letters.

“You see,” said Fudge, gesturing to the parchment, “we know that you are a Dark Lord. No matter what you may claim, we know that you have Dark talents, and will follow in the path of Grindelwald and—and You-Know-Who. We have a chart that compares you to them.” He looked at Harry triumphantly.

Harry wondered when the government of wizarding Britain had become so desperately pathetic. He kept his voice as calm as possible when he said, “Sir, I can’t read the chart.”

“You should be able to,” Crup whispered into his ear. “What kind of Dark Lord has problems with his eyes?”

Harry glared at him, and then turned back in time to see Fudge jabbing a finger into one of the boxes. “Do you see?” he asked, glancing at Harry. “You speak Parseltongue. You-Know-Who spoke Parseltongue. And Grindelwald spoke—well, he
didn’t speak to snakes, but he spoke to thestrals, and used them as part of his army.” Fudge sneered. “The connection makes sense. This is only the first of many threads, but it was the one that first led us to suspect that you might be the Dark Lord. Not wise to expose your snake-speaking ability, my lord. Not wise.”

You could take them, Regulus whispered. I’d even support you. You didn’t choose to come here, and I think you should get back to people who love you and can protect you as soon as possible. Hit them with magic, and then go back home. Come on, Harry. You know you could do it.

And that’s precisely why I won’t, Harry snapped back at him. Just because I can doesn’t mean I should. He dragged in a desperate breath, because that temptation was sounding better by the minute, and fixed his eyes on Fudge’s face again. “What are some of the other threads that led you to being sure of my incipient Lordship, sir?” he asked.

Fudge looked mildly disappointed that Harry wasn’t just confessing to being a Dark Lord right then and there, but he nodded and pointed to another box. “The Dark Lord was at the school fifty years ago when the Chamber of Secrets was last opened,” he said. “You were at the school two years ago when the Chamber of Secrets was last opened. Grindelwald—well, he wasn’t at Hogwarts, since he didn’t attend it, but he was at Durmstrang and held initiations for his Lightning Guard in an underground cave.” He frowned sternly at Harry. “Are you going to dismiss all of this as coincidence?”

“Not especially,” Harry said. “I was opening the Chamber and involved in the Petrifications of students because Voldemort possessed me, sir.” He didn’t miss the way Fudge flinched at the name and glanced over his shoulder, as though he expected to find Voldemort hiding in the corner. “So it wasn’t a coincidence. That doesn’t mean that I’m evil and Dark in and of myself.”

Fudge shook his head. “You won’t get out of this one, Mr. Potter. We know everything.” He pointed to another box. “The armies. Grindelwald used thestrals, because he could speak to them. You-Know-Who made deals with the giants and other creatures to march with him, and of course the werewolf Fenrir Greyback was famous for being part of his evil troops. And now you’ve freed the Dementors.” He turned to Harry, and waited, as if what he wanted to say should be obvious.

Harry stared at him. “I have told the Ministry the truth on that score, sir,” he said. “I sent them back home into nightmares. I didn’t keep them to build a private army out of.” He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Out of all the suspicions that someone might have about why he’d freed the Dementors, he had not thought this would be one of them.

“No one has seen a Dementor since that day,” Fudge intoned. “Did you really banish them, or did you send them somewhere safe and secret, with instructions to breed and wait for you?”

Harry shook his head. “Not that last, sir. I don’t want to be a Lord. I would command no magical creature to attack anyone else.” But you used Sylarana to threaten people, his conscience whispered. Harry winced and shoved it away. “I promise, I’m a loyal subject of wizarding Britain. Is there nothing I can do to prove this to you?” He felt a touch of true nervousness beneath his irritation and pity. He had hoped that he could persuade Fudge as he had so many other people, but the Minister was showing a complete blindness to basic logic. Harry was not sure what he could manage with dances and rituals.

“Well,” said Fudge. “Perhaps one thing.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, suspicious again. He’d been herded into this, most probably, but now that he was here, he had no choice but to ask, “What thing would that be, Minister?”

“Since you cost us the Dementors and we can no longer keep the prisoners safely in Azkaban,” said Fudge, waving towards a door at the back of the room, “we have a new method of determining whether wizards are safe to be released back into general society.” The door opened, and what appeared to be a silver ball on legs shuffled in, until Harry realized it was actually a device being carried by a short, squat witch. “Subject yourself to our test, and you can prove that you’re loyal.”

You don’t have to, said Regulus in his head, all fire and denial. Why are you subjecting yourself to this, Harry? You’re not an ordinary wizard. You don’t need to behave like one.

That only makes it all the more urgent, Harry snapped back. He wondered why he was surrounded by people so determined to shove him into being above the law. What Regulus had said sounded like something Snape or Draco would have said. Slytherins, honestly. I love them in general, but get exasperated with them in particular.

He turned back to the Minister and nodded. “Of course, sir. What do you need me to do?”

The witch set the device down next to the Minister’s desk, and revealed her face for the first time. Harry couldn’t help but
recoil. Her face was all hanging jowls and bright, gleaming eyes. She resembled nothing so much as a toad. To make it worse, she was wearing a pink jumper with small kittens gamboling on it instead of robes, and there were pink bows tied in her lank hair. She looked straight at Harry, and those bright eyes blinked.

“This is my assistant, Dolores Umbridge,” said Fudge proudly. “She is the one who has devised the loyalty test, Mr. Potter, and she is the one who will explain it to you.” He stepped out of the way.

Umbridge said, “Hem hem.” Harry thought at first that she was starting a sentence, but it seemed to be an odd throat-clearing practice. “Step up to the device, sweet child, and put your hands on it. It will measure your loyalty to the Ministry, and if you are loyal enough, it will let you go.”

Harry hesitated. “And what happens if I’m not loyal enough?”

Umbridge’s eyes gleamed like the sun. “But you have just finished saying that you are loyal, sweet child. I am sure that it will not trouble you.” She gave him a grotesque smile. Perhaps the worst thing was that her teeth all looked perfectly clean and brushed. Harry would have been more reassured if they were rotten, so that he would know she’d been eating all the sugar her costume made her look as if she should consume.

Hesitantly, he moved forward, regarding the device. It remained an enormous silver ball, pierced with holes, as though something lived inside it that needed air. It rested on tumblers, and it radiated magic, but what kind, Harry could not tell, not with three other wizards and a witch in the room.

Can you tell what it is? he asked Regulus. Or, at least, what it does?

No. Merlin take you, Harry, don’t touch it. Apparate out of here. Hit them all with a bolt of lightning. Do what you have to do to protect and save yourself. If Regulus had a body, Harry thought, he would have been jumping up and down, waving his arms like a chicken to try and scare Harry away from the device.

I don’t want to, Harry thought distinctly. If I flee, then they’ll have the right to arrest me again and treat me worse than ever. And I’m not going to kill anyone. I can’t understand your fascination with it.

He put out his hands and clasped them around the silver ball.

There came a faint shimmer, and then a burst of heat. It wasn’t uncomfortable, or Harry didn’t think he could have resisted pulling his palms back, but it did seal his hands to the ball. He tugged, unconsciously, and his hands remained right where they were.

“Relax, sweet child,” Umbridge whispered. “Just relax. The device is looking through your head now. I am sure that it will find out you are very, ah, loyal to the Ministry. Hem hem.”

Harry didn’t have much choice but to stand there hugging the ball, anyway, so that was what he did. He felt magic running through his body like water, but couldn’t tell what it did. At least it didn’t hurt.

He heard a caught breath behind him that he thought came from Grim or Crup. Harry darted a glance over his shoulder, and saw them both leaning forward, watching the device intently. Fudge was standing just beyond them, hands clasped across his middle and a beatific smile on his face.

Harry reminded himself that this was for the best. He really didn’t want to fight the Ministry. It would make his primary task, being _vates_, all the harder. And besides, how could he blame them for wanting confirmation that someone of his magical power was not a Dark Lord? Of course they would fear that, given Voldemort’s spectacular rise. They were ordinary wizards. They were people who had lives and souls of their own. He had to understand them.

Then he felt the magic of the device abruptly fill him to brimming. He blinked, feeling as if it would squeeze and drip out his eyes.

The magic began to run out of him, back into the device.

And it pulled some of his own magic with it.

Harry felt his own power rear up in startled outrage, and a moment later, his emotions reared up with it. He grabbed back at his own magic, trying to separate it from what had twined with it.
The device quaked and began to glow warm, cherry red and then gold and then white. It broke apart in his hands, and Harry felt his palms seared and burned by it. He didn’t care. He was too involved in making sure that his magic was in his body. Now he had pooled all the foreign influences into his palm, a swirling dark puddle of foul strength, and he threw it to the floor in disgust.

The puddle swirled around once, then vanished into the remains of the device.

Harry turned back to Umbridge. There was an ugly burn across her face, from where she hadn’t got out of the device’s way in time, and her toad-eyes were gleaming in shock. She pointed a trembling finger at Harry. “You assaulted the special assistant to the Minister!” she whispered, in a little-girl voice that trembled with outrage. “You assaulted me!”

Harry snarled. His magic was back where it should be, but not at all soothed. “You tried to make me a Squib, under false pretenses,” he said. “You should be grateful that all you’ve got is a burn on your face.”

“You are a Dark Lord, then.” Fudge’s voice was flat, colder and more self-confident than Harry had heard it. “I should have known, and never allowed you this test. You’re not loyal to the government of wizarding Britain, not loyal to anyone but yourself, and I was right to pass the laws.” Harry turned around in time to see Fudge sticking his hand out at Grim and Crup. “Get him. Confine him, and make sure that he can’t use his magic.”

Grim started forward, face blank. Crup was grinning, his wand swinging back and forth in his hand with a faint whistling sound.

Harry backed a step, breathing harshly. He could feel his magic surging and dancing, begging to be let through the barriers of his control. And he could do it. So easily. He could cover them in ice, or bind them where they stood, or hit them with a curse that would make them hurt nearly as much as he had under Rosier’s Blood-Burning Curse. He could conjure a snake and swallow their magic, making it a permanent part of his own. He could reach out with Legilimency, and, since they wore those collars, probably shatter their minds attempting to enter them.

I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to hurt them, damn it!

He had to use his magic in some capacity, though, to drain some of it off, so he gestured, with one hand, and whispered *Petrificus Totalus* in his mind. Grim and Crup stiffened and fell to the floor.

Harry gasped in the silence that followed, seeing Fudge’s eyes go wide with fear, as he finally realized that his incipient Dark Lord was not as tame as he had assumed. He started backing up, his mouth flapping up and down. Harry supposed he was trying to come up with a way to calm Harry down or hold him off. Harry remained still, arms wrapped around him like chains, making sure that he couldn’t lunge and hurt someone else. He had to remain still. In this moment, he was fragile.

The more he thought about what Fudge had done, the angrier he became.

*He kidnapped me. He didn’t listen to a word I said. He passed laws that seem to have been targeted specifically at me, if I’m the Dark Lord that Dumbledore thought he might have received word of. He tried to make me a Muggle, or at least a Squib.*

Harry wrapped the rage in the quicksilver pools that Snape had taught him, and felt calmness coming back to him like the return of a tide. He could do this. He was not his magic or his fury. He was more than that. And it was not as though what they had done to him was unforgivable. He could get past this. He rubbed his forehead with one seared palm.

Then Umbridge whispered something behind him, and Harry felt his back light up with pain, as though a white-hot knife were striking between his shoulders.

His magic attacked the place in a moment and banished the curse, but the damage had been done. Harry swung on the witch, and saw her just lowering her wand, a look of alarm twisting the burn on her cheek.

*She did that, he snarled to himself, low in his mind. They should not be doing this. What they have done should not be done to any witch or wizard. How many people did they drain of their magic before me? How many others would Grim and Crup confine and bring in if I didn’t do something about it?*

Then even that excuse for being angry fell away, and he was just purely enraged about what they had done to him.

*I did nothing to deserve this.*
He advanced on Umbridge, and his magic woke and filled the room like a storm.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Nine: A Kind of Wild Justice

Harry didn’t know the part of himself that woke as he stepped forward and fixed his gaze on Umbridge.

He had met his rage before. He had met his magic before. He knew about cold fury, and his frustration with his brother, and the absolute pain of betrayal he’d felt when he used the justice ritual on Lily.

He had never known this.

It came out of him in a rush, breathing past his face in a poisonous musk, coiling in front of him as a visible dark serpent with stars for eyes. He stared at it as it twisted back around and focused on him, and found himself shivering, and not from cold. He could still feel the flare of pain in his back from where Umbridge’s unknown spell had struck him. Between the shoulder blades, slightly higher than the middle of that area, and nearer the right one.

It was wrong that she had struck him like that.

It was not to be borne.

Harry discovered in that instant that he could want another human being to hurt, as deeply and dearly and devotedly as he had once wanted the sun to rise so that he could spend more time learning spells in the light and not reading a book under his covers with Lumos.

The serpent had its permission. It sped away from him in a graceful slide, and ended up coiled around one of Umbridge’s ankles, or so Harry assumed from its position under her robes. He found himself smiling. It was a lazy expression, one the muscles of his face made without his consent.

He nodded.

The serpent bit. He knew it, not because he could see it, but because he willed it so, and so it happened. The fangs cut into Umbridge’s skin and sent icy cold venom flowing into her veins. She screamed, and staggered.

Behind him, Harry heard a voice—Fudge’s—reciting some kind of charm desperately. It was probably something to disarm him.

Foolish, considering I don’t have my wand, Harry thought idly, and raised a hand without looking away from his serpent, which was now slithering up Umbridge’s calf, a ripple under her robes.

Behind him, Harry heard a voice—Fudge’s—reciting some kind of charm desperately. It was probably something to disarm him.

The serpent had its permission. It sped away from him in a graceful slide, and ended up coiled around one of Umbridge’s ankles, or so Harry assumed from its position under her robes. He found himself smiling. It was a lazy expression, one the muscles of his face made without his consent.

He nodded.

The witch screamed and kicked, and then her leg fell dead. She stared at it, and gripped it, and tried to move it. Harry knew what it would feel like in her hands: dead weight, dead stone. He had willed it so, and so it happened.

Behind him, Fudge started to say something else, since Harry had interrupted his first spell with that simple gesture, and then subsided, with a choking, coughing cry. Harry knew there was another snake wound about his throat, glowing the deepest green color of the Forbidden Forest in sunlight, its magic waiting on a command that would strangle Fudge or otherwise hurt him.

He hissed the command in Parseltongue, just to make it more frightening, and the black snake bit down again, this time high on Umbridge’s leg, near the hip. There were no words for how she screamed. Harry half-closed his eyes, understanding for the first time how his father might have gone mad and held Bellatrix Lestrange under Crucio for ten minutes, how Bellatrix might have felt when she was torturing the Longbottoms, the reasons why Dark wizards used Unforgivable Curses.

It was a moment of sheer power over one’s enemy, knowing that someone who had caused him pain was paying for it.

One more time, Harry thought, and then hissed it in Parseltongue.

The black snake moved higher, and its fangs drove home one more time, under Umbridge’s ribs on her left side. Umbridge gave another wail, and then simply toppled over. Her left side was frozen, all life gone, though it still looked like flesh. She
might limp about with her right leg, gesture with her right hand, speak from the right side of her mouth, animate her right cheek and right eye. It didn’t matter. Half of her would always be dead, a frozen grotesque, caught in the last motion it had made.

Harry became aware, abruptly, that he was laughing. He wasn’t sure when it had started, after the last snakebite or before. He wondered if it was really necessary to know.

The black snake flowed away from the half-motionless, half-thrashing Umbridge, and skimmed across the air to him, its sides lifting and rippling like butterfly wings. Harry extended an arm, and felt the serpent coil around it, head coming to rest on the back of his wrist, lazy hiss a music to his ears. Harry ran a hand down its spine and dipped his head, inhaling its scent. *Ice and wind and stone.*

He turned, slowly, to face the Minister. Fudge was staring at him, one hand clasped loosely around his wand, his breathing hardly audible. The green snake around his throat turned its head at once to focus on Harry, though it tightened a few of its coils so that Fudge wouldn’t forget who currently controlled his life.

Harry nodded back to the Minister. “Hello, sir.” His voice sounded normal. His heard was full of rushing blackness, still, and dancing snakes, and wasn’t entirely normal. *Not normal at all,* he thought. “I suppose you might be wondering why I reacted the way I did.”

Fudge’s breath climbed higher, coming in whistling gasps. Harry hissed a command at the green serpent—since it was made of his magic, it would obey him in a way that Sylaran or the Many would not have—and the snake eased its hold a bit, though it could still easily strike at any place on the Minister’s chest or throat.

“An unfortunate combination of magical attack and outrage,” said Harry, shrugging. He knew the words were true. They made sense, somewhere, in the gray rationality that was part of his brain. The chaos behind that was screaming, and something was trying to rise to the surface, but Harry would deal with it in a moment. “I tried and tried to give you excuses, reasons not to do this, chances to recognize what you were doing and back out.” He blinked at Fudge. His eyes were burning. He didn’t know with what. Even if flying drops of the black serpent’s poison had hit him, they wouldn’t make his eyes burn. “And then you tried to drain my magic, and I realized what it meant, that you have these laws and these Hounds and that sphere—” He darted a glance at the silver device that had tried to steal his magic, now shattered beyond all repair. “Well. You had that sphere.” He looked back at Fudge. “You would have used them on more people than just me, used them to terrify and beat into submission and compel. And then Umbridge hit me with the spell, and that tipped the balance of my mind over for that one moment.” He shrugged. “It’s not something that happens often. With luck, it will never happen again.”

And then the rising emotion broke through the surface, and Harry understood the stinging in his eyes. He was crying, or at least on the verge of tears. He hurt and ached, with shame and with guilt.

He had hurt another human being. But even that wasn’t the core of it, because he had done that before, both intentionally and unintentionally.

The core of it was that he had *enjoyed* it.

Harry controlled the rolling nausea, the desire to flee or set the black serpent on himself. None of them were useful reactions. Let them go too far, and he would end up like James, turning his back on the darkness that he was capable of. He would take what was useful from this matter, and that only.

That was the shame, and the guilt, and his burning comprehension of what he was, what lay under the persona of compassion and forgiveness he had tried so hard to cultivate. He looked full-on into the face of sadism and desire for pain, and he made himself keep looking.

*This is not what happens when I get angry.*

*This is what happens when I get angry and act without thinking. This is what happens when, even if for just one moment and blindly and instinctually and because people have been unreasonable, I hate.*

He studied it carefully. He had felt the emotion, of course. He had hated Voldemort when he thought of what the Dark Lord was capable of, attacking and trying to kill an innocent baby. And he had hated other people who had tried to hurt others.

But he had had something to pull him back to reality, all those other hatreds before. He’d been far from his target, or he’d had other people in danger and been able to concentrate on defending them instead of attacking just to inflict pain.
This time, he’d not had those, and the touch of physical pain had pushed him into a burning desire to make the person who’d hurt him hurt, even if just for a moment.

That was the difference. He would look at that, and he would learn that, and he would make sure that he never felt it again.

*I cannot afford vengeance. What am I, if I turn to it? Someone else might take vengeance without causing much more than a slap and a few hurtful words. When I do it, I maim.*

Harry clenched a hand in front of him and closed his eyes, hissing to the serpent. The black snake flowed away from him again, and he heard a little whimper of fear from Umbridge. Harry did not look as the snake settled on her again. Yes, it would have to bite her once more, but it would be only three bites, and then it would draw back the cold poison and leave her free.

Harry was sick, and shaking, and very tired, and ashamed of himself to his heart. Umbridge and Fudge and Grim and Crup and all the others who might have helped in the doing of this were still people. He had the right to fight back and defend himself and others from them. He did not have the right to torture them, or treat their lives as if they were worth less than his was. He did not have the right to treat them as if they had no souls, no lives, wishes, hopes, dreams of their own, or as if they had never laughed or done anything good.

He did not want to live in a world in which that was true.

What he could do was make sure they did not do anything like this to anyone else again, in the future.

Harry lifted his head and opened his eyes. He could hear Umbridge’s desperate, crying whimpers subsiding behind him as she gained back control of her left side, and the Minister’s eyes were still wide and fixed on him. Harry moved a hand, and the green serpent dissolved into mist. Fudge shook his head, touched his neck as though to make sure the snake was really gone, and then took a deep breath.

“I know what you’re about to say, Minister,” said Harry quietly. “That only a Dark Lord would do the things I have done.”

Fudge squinted at him. “Are you going to deny that that was Dark magic, Potter? Or that you caused my assistant pain?”

Harry sighed. His own nails had been cutting into his palms, and he hadn’t realized it. He flicked his fingers, partially to ease the pain and partially to dissolve the black serpent, now that it was no longer needed. “No. I am sorry about that, Minister.”

He lifted his head. Fudge was staring at him.

“But,” said Harry, and let just a trace of hardness slip into his voice, “I will not be sorry if I hear that you have continued using your Hounds to arrest people, or forced this ridiculous registration on anyone else, or tried to drain anyone else’s magic.” He took a step forward. “You know what I can do now.” He flicked his hand, once, twice, and the bindings on Grim and Crup eased. They climbed to their feet, eyes warily fixed on him, but made no move to reach for their wands. “Do you really want to anger me?”

Fudge blustered. “Everything we used was Light! The sphere came from the house of a respected Light wizard family! The spell Dolores used on you was in defense of her own life! Even the collars my Hounds wear could not be put on without their consent, and serve to defend their minds from Dark influences—”

Harry felt a faint sensation of relief that he wouldn’t be responsible for freeing the Hounds, coupled with irritation that Fudge continued to babble. “Sir,” he said, his tone barely controlled, “shut up.”

Fudge shut up.

Harry breathed in and out and in again, until his anger was his to master once more. Then he said, “This is the bargain I’ll make with you. Cease using your Hounds at once. Split them up and mix them back in to other departments. Concentrate on rehabilitating Azkaban and assigning human guards to the prisoners there. The Hounds might do nicely,” he added, and his voice leaked bitterness. He clamped down on it. He needed to be calm, controlled. “And strike these ridiculous edicts directed at certain Dark talents from the books. You might ask the full Wizengamot about any in the future that you feel are a good idea.”

“And what will I gain?” Fudge demanded.
Harry lifted his head. *Stupid, and beyond stupid, but I can’t start a war with the Ministry, and just because he is stupid does not mean I have the right to hurt him.* “My silence,” he said with absolute evenness. “I will not tell anyone about what I have learned in this room today, about events—including the kidnapping of an innocent child, the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, taken to the Ministry without even his guardian to accompany him—that could utterly destroy you, Minister.”

Fudge’s face went white. Harry nodded. There was a reason all this had been kept secret, with the Dark wizard registration laws the only ripple to mar the surface. Fudge was aware of what the wizarding public would and would not tolerate, or at least the outer limits of it.

And still Fudge whispered, “We all know that isn’t what happened here. And we would have the word of four against one.”

Harry snorted aloud. “I am willing to take Veritaserum,” he said. “Are you?”

Fudge’s hands locked together near his mouth, as though he could imagine the damaging truths spewing forth from it.

Harry nodded. “But I can easily enough tell everyone the truth, about *everything*, if I get a hint that you haven’t kept our bargain. I am willing to trade you the past for the future, but only if you *keep* these events in the past.”

“That truth would include that you’re a Dark wizard, and use Dark magic,” Fudge said.

*He must have been a Gryffindor. He doesn’t know when to give up. And, right now, I have to be Slytherin.* Harry locked his face into the calm mask that Lily had taught him to perfect, looked the Minister in the eye, and said, “I don’t care about that.”

He was lying.

He cared about that. So much. He did not want it revealed, did not think the wizarding public would care to call a boy innocent who would create snakes out of magic and set them on the Minister and the Special Assistant to the Minister. He did not want to see the horror in the eyes of students at Hogwarts whom he had persuaded, with careful effort, not to cringe when he walked by. He did not want to see the doubt in his allies’ faces, as they reconsidered whether he could ever be a Dark Lord. He could imagine all the attention fixed on him if this got out.

He did not want it.

But he had managed to bluff Fudge into thinking that all he got out of this deal was the cessation of his stupidity, he saw, when he could focus again. Fudge was nodding furiously, and muttering himself blue in the face. Harry turned his head, and saw Umbridge bobbing her head too, though her toad-eyes were furious. Grim and Crup watched him with expressions of a deep and familiar loathing, but they inclined their heads when Harry stared at him.

It was done. It was *done*. Harry could feel his knees beginning to wobble. He had to get out of there before anyone saw.

“Remember, Minister,” he whispered. “One sign.”

Fudge nodded again, and Harry turned and left the room through the door that Umbridge had come in by, striking blindly for the lifts and the Auror Office. He wondered, briefly, who was responsible for cleaning the room he’d been in, given the beetle that zipped past him with its wings buzzing as he opened the door.

*******

*Well, Rufus Scrimgeour thought to himself as he led a group of Aurors towards the tenth level of the Ministry, from which an enormous burst of magic had come welling, *this is certainly turning into an interesting afternoon.*

First had come the owls, hurtling through his windows like the small magical weapons the Glendorring brothers had used in the First War, bearing piece after piece of news. Two former Aurors, both sacked, had been spotted entering and leaving the Ministry on several occasions, with sightings of both confirmed just this morning. Harry Potter had spoken Parseltongue in Knockturn Alley, and then Apparated with an obviously illegal bunch of South African hive cobras. No one could find the Minister, and several of his people who’d been waiting to deliver reports to the fellow wanted to know what they should do now.

Severus Snape, Harry Potter’s guardian, had written a single terse message saying his charge had been kidnapped by two gray-cloaked wizards calling themselves Hounds, and that the methods he had of tracking Harry had fallen asoful of powerful
wards, most likely the Ministry’s.

Rufus could put together a puzzle as well as any wizard and better than most, which was part of the reason he was Head Auror, and though he didn’t know all the details, he had a clear sense of the general outline.

Something was rotten in the heart of Minister Fudge.

Had been for a long time, really, Rufus thought absently, as he and his team descended past the Department of Mysteries. Cornelius had been a good enough sort in the beginning, coasting into power on the benign promises, empty of substance, that had won many Ministers election in the past. And he had done no worse than most: half-hearted meddlesome do-gooding, and then a whole-hearted plunge into public relations. Rufus was used to working around Ministers rather than with them, and this was no different.

And then Cornelius started becoming afraid.

Rumor traced it back to a werewolf attack several years ago that he’d barely survived, or to the defection of a good friend to the Dark, or simply to the rumors circulating among the scum they brought to Azkaban of the Dark Lord’s return. Rufus didn’t know. He didn’t really care about the cause. He saw the effects, and the effects rotted the Minister from the inside out, turned him into a shameless puppet swayed towards any “Light” wizard who wanted to whisper the right, reassuring words into his ear.

Rufus had watched the dissolution of the Minister’s bribery-fueled friendships with some Dark families, like the Malfoys, with high satisfaction, but when Cornelius was all but dancing attendance on replacements who soothed him with lies and half-truths and whispered elaborate plans to “secure the future against the Dark,” he didn’t think the result was a net gain for his Ministry.

*You don’t cover in fear from the Dark, for Merlin’s sake,* Rufus thought, as he approached the door to level ten, his cloak flaring out behind him and his limp so smoothly integrated into his stride that it never marred it. *You fight it.*

The door opened before he could get there. Rufus halted and brought his wand up in front of him.

Harry Potter stood there, and he stank of Dark magic.

Rufus’s nose twitched, but he forced himself to lower his wand. Yes, he’d dedicated himself to Light magic so early and so young that he could literally smell it when a wizard used other kinds of spells, a claim that he was content to have remain as rumor. That didn’t mean that he was ready to strike a child just for using it, especially when Potter lifted his head and fixed his eyes on Rufus’s.

*Something has happened,* Rufus thought. Those green eyes were too like the eyes of children who had been infected with lycanthropy, the eyes of women who’d survived a centaur rampage, the eyes of Voldemort’s last victim on record before he went after the Potters, Alba Starrise, who’d said softly, over and over, that she was fine, and then hanged herself in her cell when Rufus went to fetch her tea.

He spoke the same words he spoke then, his voice low, soothing. His team came up behind him and stopped. He heard young Percy Weasley gulp audibly, but the others remained silent. They knew better than to interrupt him when he was like this. “It’s all right. I’m here to protect you. What happened, Harry?”

The boy blinked, once, twice. He lifted a hand to touch his face, as though surprised that emotion was showing there.

Then he straightened and shut the emotion away behind a stern mask. It was one of the most impressive things Rufus had ever seen, and one of the most outrageous. Potter simply sealed his face, and then looked him right in the eye and said, “Nothing.”

He was a practiced liar, that much was clear. Rufus might even have believed him, if he hadn’t seen those eyes.

His gaze went to the door from level ten, but no one could be seen there. Of course, most of the workers would probably have fled the explosion of magic, which had certainly come from Potter.

He leaned down towards Potter and whispered, “Why are you here, then? Your guardian sent me word that you’d been abducted.”
“A misunderstanding,” Potter said, his voice light, dismissive. “Could you take me to him, please? I’d like to see him.”

Rufus considered. Snape wasn’t there—no, wait, probably by now he was. Rufus had left instructions for him to be admitted to his office at once when he arrived, partially to content the man and partially to prevent him from going anywhere else and doing anything…unfortunate. Rufus believed he had accurately taken the measure of Severus Snape. The man was a devoted, driven guardian. He was also a Dark wizard who had been accused of being a Death Eater. Rufus intended to forget neither.

But the desperate hope in the boy’s voice was no fakery.

Rufus decided that questions could wait. He nodded and extended a hand. “Come with me,” he said.

Harry hesitated, then shook his head. “With all due respect, sir, I really don’t need to hold anyone’s hand.” He strode ahead of Rufus then, parting the ranks of the stunned and silent Aurors, and paused to look back at Rufus. “Your office, sir?”

Rufus made a certain resolve then. He knew he could keep it. Scrimgeour’s always kept their word, and he had done it without fail since he was twelve years old.

He was going to find out what had happened, what had caused a child to look like that in his own Ministry, and when he’d discovered the corruption, he would tear it out root and branch.

He’d been in Slytherin, but the Sorting Hat had recommended Hufflepuff to him. Once Rufus Scrimgeour began digging, he would not stop.

For now, though, it was kinder to pretend to believe the lie, and the boy should be back with people who loved him. He nodded.

“My office,” he said, and walked up the corridor behind Harry, who held his back as straight as a sword.

He did manage to catch Percy Weasley’s eye as he passed, and gave him a stern glance. _If this doesn’t measure and weigh him, nothing will._

Percy’s shoulders and chin dropped, snatching his eyes from Rufus’s gaze. But then he looked up, and steel gleamed under the surface of his face.

Rufus hid a smile. _My judgment was not in error, then. Of course, when it comes to recognizing potential Aurors, it very rarely is._

*******

Snape sat, once again, in the office crowded with more photographs than could ever be of use to anyone, speaking of a life lived to the corners, and sipped the tea that Scrimgeour’s assistant had brought him, and tried to think of nothing at all. Scrimgeour had gone in search of a burst of magic that he thought was most likely Harry, that assistant had told him, but he had refused to reveal what level the burst had come from. There was nothing else that Snape could do, unless he wanted to run through the Auror Office and threaten people into telling him. And there were Aurors who had passed the door, glanced inside, and nodded to him who would prevent that. He knew it.

Harry was safe. He was going to be all right.

Snape told himself that, because considering anything else was counterproductive.

He did let his mind slip to what had happened after Harry was abducted, and felt a seizure of rage in his chest. The gray-cloaked wizard who had followed Harry and the first one in their Apparition had cast some kind of glittering dust on the ground as he Apparated out. Snape didn’t recognize it, but it reacted with the dirt and rose in a choking cloud that kept him coughing for long moments.

Then he’d tried to get a hold on Harry with the passive link the potion had created between them—and failed. The dust had prevented that, he thought, slowing his brain and confusing the bond. Or perhaps it was the Ministry’s wards, because even when the effect of the dust seemed to fade, he still could sense nothing from his charge, even the distant rush of panicked thoughts.

Snape had entered the school. He had made his way to the Headmaster’s office and told Albus what had happened. Albus’s
eyebrows could still make his face formidable when he frowned, Snape found. Albus had turned and firecalled the Minister from his own hearth without a pause.

After long moments of talking to an obviously frightened young wizard, the Headmaster had turned around and shaken his head, as Snape had suspected would happen. “The Minister is not currently available,” he said quietly.

Snape had nodded and swept from the office, ignoring Albus’s tense call behind him.

He had knelt down in front of his own hearth, his mind curiously calm, and firecalled the Malfoys. He did not know where Harry was, and if he had, wards would probably prevent him from Apparating in. He did not know who the Hounds were, or what they wanted. If he went charging into this situation without information, he could get Harry killed.

He had to sit on the panic, and the fury about his panic, that had made him act irrationally all day today, both with the goblins and with the snakes. He had not kept Harry safe by lashing out. So he would make sure that he did not do it this time, that his actions were controlled and Slytherin.

Harry could be dying right this moment, and because of the wards, you wouldn’t know it.

Snape shook his head slightly. No, he wouldn’t know it. That meant that it was still best to be rational about this. And that meant gaining information. At least he could take vengeance on Harry’s killers, if he could not save his charge himself.

Snape plunged his head into the flames at the right moment, and found himself staring into the small antechamber where Narcissa had welcomed him at Christmas. A crack was presumably a house elf Apparating to tell someone that he was calling. Snape cracked his impatience, threw it into one of the quicksilver pools of his mind, and waited.

Draco came through the door to the room at a dead run, barely caught himself from slipping on a rug, and looked at Snape with an ashen face. Snape found it easier to be serene after seeing him, incredibly. The knowledge that someone else was terrified seemed to relieve his own fear.

“Sir?” Draco whispered. “What happened to Harry?”

Snape said quietly, “The Ministry’s kidnapped him, Draco. I need you to fetch your father. I need someone with connections in the Ministry, someone who might be able to find out where they took Harry.”

“What seems to be the problem, Severus?”

Lucius Malfoy strode in behind his son, his face frozen marble. Snape did not waste time loathing him for his calmness, and instead outlined the situation with the precision that he’d learned to use when he was a spy among the Death Eaters for the Order of the Phoenix. He included the dust and the gray cloaks and the names of the Hounds as details, because if anything could identify the department of the wizards who had kidnapped Harry, those were the things.

And then he had to watch Lucius Malfoy shake his head slowly, a frown on his face.

“The Minister no longer speaks to me,” he said quietly. “And none of those sound familiar.”

Snape hissed under his breath. At least Lucius had been honest, though. This would have taken longer if Snape had had to wade through lying games to find out how much the other man knew.

“Very well,” he said. “We do have an ally inside the Ministry itself, though he has no fireplace in his office that I saw. I will write to him. Thank you for your help.” He nodded curtly to both Draco and Lucius, and made to withdraw.

“There is something else I can do,” said Lucius, unexpectedly. “Adalrico Bulstrode’s wife Elfrida works with the goblins, insuring that coins passed in Diagon Alley are real. She is at least nearer the Ministry than we are. I will contact Adalrico, and ask him to inform his wife of this.”

Snape nodded tightly. “Thank you.” The Bulstrodes were Harry’s formal allies, and the more people who knew of this, the better.

“It will not stop there,” Lucius assured him. “Others will hear of this.” He was smiling faintly now, a hard, cold fire in his eyes. Snape studied him. He doubted highly that Lucius cared for Harry as Snape or his son did, but he seemed to be enjoying the challenge that these politics represented. And, of course, he was in the middle of a truce-dance with Harry, and he would
want to see Harry survive to the end of it. “The Parkinsons are also allied to him, and my wife speaks to Hawthorn regularly. And there are others who will be…interested.”

Snape felt a hard fire of his own take hold in his chest. “Thank you,” he repeated.

He glanced once at Draco, and felt a stab of pity for the boy. Draco’s eyes were wide, his breathing just on the edge of taking in too little air. Snape sighed. Among the many, many things he would speak to Harry about—

*If they got Harry back alive.*

—was how he planned to conduct his deepening friendship with Lucius Malfoy’s son. Snape had slowly become worried over the boy’s obsession with Harry. Draco needed to be his own person, needed to have some interests and hobbies and life of his own.

“Illicit record let me know when you find him,” Draco whispered.

Snape nodded. He thought the boy would have asked to come with him, but not with his father there. “I will,” he said, and then pulled his head out of the flames and turned to write the letter to Rufus Scrimgeour. A different bird had answered him almost at once, one of the Ministry falcons bred for speed, inviting him to come to Scrimgeour’s office.

And now, here he sat.

Then he felt magic flood the air, or the spent remains of magic, and the bond snapped into place between him and his ward again, filled with dark, sluggish, churning emotions.

Snape was on his feet and turning in an instant. Harry came into the office with Scrimgeour and other Aurors not far behind him.

Snape looked at him. Harry looked as cool as if he had merely gone for one of his walks in the Forbidden Forest. That was only on the surface, of course. Snape knelt down and held out his arms, not caring for Scrimgeour. At least the man had turned his back, and was shooing the other Aurors out of the office, as well.

Harry bowed his head and moved forward, hugging Snape carefully, as though he thought he would vanish in a moment. Snape closed his eyes and let the panic dissipate completely. He said nothing. He didn’t think that there was anything he could say and do this moment justice.

Of course, then the moment passed, and he sat back and met Harry’s eyes and asked, “What happened?”

Harry regarded him, calm and alert. “Nothing,” he said quietly. “The Minister blustered at me until he realized that I wasn’t a threat. Then he let me go.”

Snape stared at him in disbelief. The boy was lying, of course—he must be—but that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that Harry had forcibly calmed his swirling emotions and hardened them into steely determination. Seemingly, he was not about to tell Snape the actual truth of what had happened.

“You were *abducted*,” Snape whispered. “I heard them read you charges.”

“All a ruse,” said Harry. He didn’t smile, perhaps because he knew it would have been manic, but his eyes remained as determined and steady as ever they had been. “The Minister wanted a pretext to haul me in under the Dark wizarding laws, so he found one. We had a talk about it. In the end, he saw sense, and let me go.”

“That is a lie,” Snape said.

“It’s the truth,” said Harry. “Nothing happened between us.”

“*Something* did,” Scrimgeour interjected, turning around abruptly. Snape snarled at himself for forgetting the man was still there. At least his eyes were fixed on Harry, and not Snape. “You let go a burst of magic strong enough that we felt it through the wards all the way up here.”

*Up here?* Harry had been held somewhere below, then. Snape intended to find out where.
Harry’s eyes gave a brief flicker, and the tight coil of his emotions threatened to collapse. His breath sawed at his lungs, but he turned to Scrimgeour and shook his head. “I’m afraid that you must be mistaken, sir. The burst of magic had to have come from something else.”

“I do not think so,” said Scrimgeour.

Harry simply regarded him.

“You were abducted,” Snape began again.

Harry turned to him with a faint frown. “I wish you would stop calling it that, sir. It’s too dramatic a word. The Minister wanted me to come for a visit, and he chose a somewhat pretentious and abrupt way of inviting me, I admit. But it is all settled now. It was all a misunderstanding.”

“When someone snatches a child without his guardian or his parent,” Scrimgeour said, in a gentle tone that Snape knew he could not have managed through his astonished fury, “and gives them no choice about coming along, then we call that abduction, Harry. What the Minister did to you was illegal.”

“To be punished, it has to come to trial, doesn’t it?” Harry asked, as though this were a matter of academic interest.

Scrimgeour nodded.

“This won’t,” said Harry, and shrugged. “I am not going to call it abduction. I won’t file charges against the Minister, or the Ministry for that matter.”

Snape snarled and grabbed his shoulder, turning him. Harry simply pivoted under his hand and stared up at him, face expressionless.

“I will file them, Harry,” he told him, wanting his charge to make no mistake about this. “I know the names of the men who abducted you.”

“Invited me, sir. And you do?” Harry asked.

“Of course. The Hounds.”

Harry laughed softly. “That isn’t their official title, sir. I’m sure that you won’t find them referred to by that name anywhere in Minister Fudge’s records.”

“I think I may know,” said Scrimgeour. “I have had reports of two ex-Aurors, sacked for gross negligence of their duty, coming and going from the building lately.”

Snape did not miss the way Harry’s body stiffened. His voice grew high and strained, but he still did not lash out, though the magic circling him bubbled as though he were in a pool at the foot of a waterfall. “I will ask you this only once, sir. Please, please leave it. I will not testify in any trial. I have reason to believe that the Minister won’t use this method of inviting people to see him again, and that the talk we had has no reason to be repeated. I don’t want to fight with you. Either of you,” he added, turning his eyes wearily to Snape. “But I gave my word, and this is done.”

“You gave your word?” Snape knew his voice was dangerously soft. He couldn’t help it. He could feel the desire to take vengeance swallowing him alive, tearing away at all the softer parts of him.

Harry nodded, his face firm. “Yes. This is done.”

“It is not right, Harry,” Snape said, feeling his frustration build. Surely, the boy had to see that? “Your rights were violated. The Minister might do this to other people——”

Harry shook his head, an expression Snape had never seen in his eyes. “No, he won’t. We did—discuss that.”

Snape snarled at him.

Harry matched him, stare for stare, the Occlumency shields burning behind his eyes.
Something else happened to him, Snape thought. There is no reason that he would be so reluctant to tell us this if it were merely him playing the part of victim—even on the scale of what happened with Black last year. Did he do something?

“Harry,” he said, keeping his voice low and soothing, “you know that whatever you may have done, particularly in defense of your own life, is excusable.”

Harry flinched, flinched with soul and body both, and then tucked his chin into his chest. “Please,” he whispered. “Please, leave it, leave it if you love me.”

Snape reached out a careful hand. “Harry—“

Harry shook his head, wild hair flying. “I’d like to be by myself for a few minutes before we go back to Hogwarts,” he said, and darted a glance at Scrimgeour. “If you don’t mind.”

Scrimgeour shook his head, and Harry opened the door to his office and ducked out before Snape could stop him. When he moved to follow his charge, Scrimgeour reached out and put a hand on his arm.

“No,” he said quietly. “I think what he said is true, and he does need to be alone.”

“He can’t hide from this long,” said Snape, and heard the frustration in his own voice snap like melting ice. “It is not natural. And his allies have already been informed. They do have the right, under the terms of alliance, to ask for formal satisfaction from the Minister himself, or challenge him in court in Harry’s place.”

“To do that, however, we must still know the details of what happened,” said Scrimgeour, “and we will not get those from Harry in his current state, nor from the Minister ever, by his choice.” His gaze was calm on Snape’s face. “I can tell you one thing. I felt Dark magic lingering around Harry when he opened the door. My guess is that he did something with that Dark magic, something he is violently ashamed of.”

Snape understood in a few moments, remembering Harry’s grief over killing the Dark Lord in Rodolphus’s body. If anything like that had happened, or even on a smaller scale, he would want to hide. Snape wondered if Harry thought they could not forgive him, whatever it was, and felt sick.

No one else was there with him, most likely—no one else to defend, no one else he could have used or excused the Dark magic for. He was defending himself. And now he feels ashamed.

He longed to go after Harry and reassure him that of course they could forgive him, that whatever he had done was probably not bad enough to require forgiveness in the first place, but Scrimgeour’s hand clamped lightly on his wrist and drew his attention.

“What?” he growled, facing the Auror.

“I think this matter too important to be left up to silence, even as you do.” Scrimgeour’s eyes were narrowed as if he were looking into the sun. “If my Minister is a man like this, one who would kidnap children and make deals with them, then I want to know. And there is one place to start, even if Harry is not yet in any shape to tell us. I will give you the names and descriptions of the ex-Aurors my people saw.”

Snape nodded, regret and relief rushing through him in a simultaneous torrent. He would grant Harry his moments alone, but he could do little more. He would have to push this forward, threaten and fight it, no matter what Harry’s wishes were.

The Minister had simply gone too far this time.

*******

“You’re acting stupid, you know.”

Harry had been leaning on a wall in a disused closet for the past few minutes, trying frantically to stem both his fear and his sorrow. He straightened now and whipped around, his hands clenching.

A witch stood in the doorway of the closet, her mouth pinched in a small, hard smile as she watched him. Her hair was blonde and set in curls that could not be natural, given that they didn’t shift even as she turned her head to study Harry better. Her face was crusted with makeup, at least around her eyebrows, and her glasses crusted with jewels. Harry could see a scroll
of parchment in one hand and a quill in the other. She managed to lean one shoulder casually on the side of the door despite her hands being full.

“What do you mean?” Harry whispered, wondering if this was someone else who had ideas about how he should use his magic.

“My name’s Rita Skeeter,” said the woman.

Harry stiffened and narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, yes, glare at me if you want,” said Skeeter, sounding unaffected. “But this is your chance, you know. And you’re wasting it. That’s why I said you were stupid.” She made a wide gesture with her parchment that caused it to shake, as if what she said should be self-evident.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Harry, returning to his calm mask and voice again.

“I saw everything that happened in the Ministry’s interrogation rooms,” said Skeeter. “And I do mean everything.”

Harry stood in silence for a moment, if one could call the thundering staccato of his heart in his ears silence.

“And I am going to publish that story,” Skeeter said, examining her quill. “But it could be a better story if I could speak to an eyewitness.” She glanced up at him, eyes hard as the jewels on her glasses. “A willing eyewitness, one who’s able to confirm every detail. And one who, should he cooperate with me, can seize control of the ripples that are going to spread from this moment.” She shook her head, a faint smile on her face. “This can’t stay secret, child. It’s too big. And the wizarding public deserves to know the truth about their Minister, anyway.”

“That’s only your excuse,” Harry whispered.

“Of course it is,” said Skeeter, sounding faintly impatient. “But, you see, there’s a difference between breaking a scandal that everyone involved will deny, and breaking a truth that’s going to make me a heroine. And I’m tired of the first.” She leaned forward and locked eyes with him. “I’m offering you the chance here, Potter. Refuse, and I’ll just publish the story anyway. Cooperate with me, and I am going to make you look damn good.” Her eyes glinted. “What do you say?”

“I gave my word to the Minister—” Harry whispered.

“He’ll break it,” said Skeeter. “It’ll get broken. I told you, this is too big. There are already other people who are aware that something’s wrong, anyway. I was in the Head Auror’s office, too. Your guardian’s already broken the word to your allies.”

Harry felt an abrupt surge of panic. Could he reach out and tell them that it was nothing, that they couldn’t worry about it—

No. No, I can’t.

Harry swallowed, feeling as if it were acid instead of saliva in his mouth. No, he didn’t have the right to restrict anyone else’s free will like that. Snape only knowing the truth was one thing, because there weren’t many people who would take his word against the Ministry’s, given his past. But the Parkinsons, the Bulstrodes, and, oh Merlin help him, the Malfoys…

Harry’s ability to keep his word to Fudge had relied on them never finding out. He knew that once they had an inkling of the truth, they would pursue it to the end.

And lying to them would weaken their trust in him. And that was not permissible.

Being vates and a trustworthy ally is worth more to me, he realized, the thoughts bounding like boulders, than hiding what I’ve done, or keeping my word to Fudge.

He breathed slowly, carefully, in and out, in and out. Another truth was staring him in the face now, even as his sadism had earlier.

I can’t hide from this. I can’t recoil from this. I can’t sit on this, and I can’t run.

Draco was right. There are moments when I am going to have to step out into the light, and act like a leader even if I’m not one, and not give the credit or the blame or the burden to anyone else.
Harry felt as if he rode a wave that was about to break and crash any moment. He remembered the beach in Northumberland on Midsummer, the distant breakers rising beyond the tame little ones. They had fallen and roared and destroyed their walls of dark gray water, but the foam spinning from their tops had sparked and dazzled Harry in the sunlight.

*I will have to hope that this brings light, and not just destruction.*

He met Skeeter’s eyes. “When do we go to press?”

---

**Chapter Ten: Alliance and Defiance**

A year since her first transformation. A year since her first full moon.

That was the substance of Hawthorn Parkinson’s thoughts as she prepared herself to go to the Ministry and meet with Potter. Oh, physically she was facing a mirror and using a pale ribbon to tie her blonde hair out of her face, but mentally she was back in the storage shed where she had made her husband and daughter lock her, a beast without Wolfsbane, yelping and tearing at the walls.

A year ago this day, she had not even been certain that she wanted to live. At the moment, she could not imagine anything she wanted more.

She carefully arranged the ribbon pointing to one side, and then turned to face the welcoming room where Elfrida was waiting on the other side of the Gringotts fireplace. She halted when she saw the dark figure of her husband, Dragonsbane, in the way. Usually he would have let her go without question. Necromancers tended to avoid crowds, partly because there were still prejudices against and uneasiness around them, and partly because it was wearying for them, knowing when every witch and wizard they saw would die.

Yet here Dragonsbane was, standing determinedly still, in the way that meant he wanted to go with her.

*Are you certain?* Hawthorn asked him with her hands. He could not speak aloud to her except on two nights of the year, Halloween and Walpurgis.

Dragonsbane made the subtle move within his black hood that indicated a nod. He held out an arm to her. Hawthorn smiled and took it, kissing him on the cheek, or the cloth that covered his cheek, as they proceeded into the welcoming room. She had never asked him when she would die, though she knew he saw it; she had never even felt a temptation to know. There was living dangerously, and there was living from day to day. Hawthorn preferred the latter, though she kept an eye always on the future.

Elfrida’s head still hovered in the flames, that of a pale and pretty witch with ash blonde hair and too wide blue eyes. “Both of you are coming through?” she asked, gaze darting to Dragonsbane.

Hawthorn nodded.

Elfrida blinked, then shrugged. “Say Gringotts Fourth,” she instructed them, and pulled her head out of the flames.

Hawthorn gathered up a pinch of Floo powder from the dish on top of the mantle, but before she could throw it into the flames, Pansy interrupted them, stepping demurely through the door on the other side of the room. “You’re going to the Ministry, Mother, Father?” Her voice lilted into surprise on the second name, but by the time Hawthorn turned and looked at her, she had hidden it. Hawthorn smiled. Her daughter was well-trained, and knew all the pureblood courtesies. What some of Hawthorn’s friends had called her “unusual upbringing” had added to Pansy’s life and not taken away from it.

“Yes, my darling,” she said, putting out a hand. Pansy came and immediately stood with her cheek next to it, not touching it. Hawthorn leaned nearer and took a deep sniff. One of the few pleasures that came with her werewolf curse was learning to smell others—both their added scents, and what they smelled like underneath. Pansy was perfume and rich, strong flesh. “There’s been an incident with the Minister and Harry Potter. We may be gone some time.”

Pansy nodded solemnly, but did not ask to join them. She was her mother’s blood heir, but not her magical one, and formal political meetings with allies were restricted to magical ones, the more important kind. “Of course, Mother. I shall have the
house elves prepare something for me.”

“Not cheese,” said Hawthorn at once, recognizing the look in her daughter’s eyes. “It made your stomach upset the last time.”

Pansy sighed, but dipped her head, murmured, “Of course, Mother,” a second time, and vanished in the direction of the kitchens.

Hawthorn cast the powder into the flames, calling out, “Gringotts Fourth!” When the flames flared green, she wrapped her arms around Dragonsbane—he could not say the destination aloud and so would have to Floo along with her—and stepped into the fire.

Their destination was relatively far away, but Hawthorn had always enjoyed Flooing—the rush through the darkness, the excuse to get slightly dirty because no one would expect otherwise, the stumble at the end as the other fireplace spat them out. The speed of werewolf legs was the only thing she had found that was faster, since she didn’t trust herself on a broom.

She and Dragonsbane came out in a richly appointed chamber, the walls red and gold. Hawthorn curled her lip slightly. The goblins made it a point to have red and gold everywhere, the colors of Gryffindor. It was a subtle statement back to Salazar Slytherin, who had tricked them into a bargain long ago, to favor the colors he despised. Hawthorn thought that a thousand years was quite enough time to get over an insult, however, and did not understand why the goblins kept doing it.

“Hello, Hawthorn.”

Hawthorn turned and nodded to Elfrida Bulstrode, who was waiting for them, her hands clasped at her waist, her head bent down, her eyes on the floor, her voice quiet and gentle. Elfrida had been trained as one of the traditional *puellaris* witches, the maidenly and gentle ones, who were nothing but calm and gracious in public. They saved their ferocity for arguments in private, and for defense of their children; they were rumored to be able to turn into lionesses if someone harmed their sons and daughters. Hawthorn had never seen that happen, and hoped she never would, since she never planned to harm a Bulstrode child.

This time, though, there was something more to Elfrida than her traditional mannerisms. Hawthorn sniffed, and then sniffed again. Most women had a faint undertone of blood to their scents at all times, signaling where they would bleed from their wombs, even if they weren’t menstruating right then. But Elfrida’s scent was empty of blood, and had been for some time.

That meant only one thing.

“Congratulations, my dear,” said Hawthorn warmly, reaching out to grip the other witch’s hand. “How far along are you?”

Elfrida looked cautiously up from the floor, and when she found the permission to meet Hawthorn’s gaze in her smile, she smiled back. “Three months along,” she said. “I’ve dreamed. Adalrico and I are going to have another daughter.”

Hawthorn inclined her head. “Congratulations,” she repeated.

“Indeed,” said a voice at Elfrida’s shoulder, and Adalrico Bulstrode stalked in through another door, his formal negotiations cloak swirling behind him. Millicent, as both his blood daughter and his magical heir, followed close at his heels. “We are proud beyond proud.” He moved up to his wife, seized her in his arms, and kissed her firmly, which Elfrida yielded to with her usual grace. Millicent moved around her parents, with a slightly amused glance at them, and bowed. She never curtsied, knowing, as any woman would, Hawthorn thought, that it only made her look ridiculous. She wore formal robes, too, not the gown that Hawthorn and her mother did.

“Mrs. Parkinson,” said Millicent, her voice polished and polite. “I trust that you have dealt well with the Dark gift that you received last August?”

“With help,” said Hawthorn, “I have indeed.” She admired Millicent for a moment. Pansy had other strengths, but this girl was a perfect Slytherin snake, tall for her age, with a mind obviously able to tie itself into knots behind her calm face. And unafraid, too, which would serve her well in politics. “Now I am going to repay one source of that help.”

“What happened, exactly?” Millicent asked. “I came in on the tail end of my parents’ conversation.”

“Harry Potter was taken captive by two gray-cloaked wizards who called themselves Hounds and claimed to be working for the Ministry,” said Lucius Malfoy, as he came in through another door. Behind him was Narcissa, who met Hawthorn’s eyes and nodded to her, and his son Draco, who looked half-distracted. “And we have just received another communication from
Severus Snape, who is acting as his guardian. The boy has been found, but Professor Snape believes it best if we are all there to hear what happened. It concerns us, as his formal allies.”

Hawthorn flicked up a brow. The day that Lucius Malfoy allies with someone on formal terms and means it is the day that I am freed of this curse. She considered Lucius a good politician, but too likely to keep playing both sides until he could no longer do so, always looking more for his own advantage than his allies’. His wife was worth ten of him, being able to actually risk her life and ideals for her ideals.

Her gaze went to Draco. The boy was Lucius’s blood heir, but not yet his magical one. Of course, Lucius had insisted his son was young yet, and the talent had time to manifest.

Save that Millicent manifested when she was six, and even others younger than fourteen, I might believe that.

Hawthorn shook herself free of her preoccupation when she realized that Elfrida was announcing how they would reach the Ministry. She had to keep her mind focused on the meeting and its purpose, which was Potter and finding out how deeply this corruption in the Ministry had gone. Being Potter’s formal ally was more than a convenience, and had been ever since he had given her the first vials of Wolfsbane Potion.

“The goblins keep a series of carts that travel to the Ministry,” Elfrida was explaining. “They’ll let me take one to the Fourth Level of the Ministry, and from there it’s only a short walk to the Head Auror’s office, where Professor Snape has told Mr. Malfoy that he and his charge are waiting for us.”

She glanced around the room, blushing when she met the men’s eyes, to see if anyone would object to that plan. No one did. Adalrico put an arm around his wife’s waist and steered her towards the door he and Millicent had come in by, murmuring in her ear.

Hawthorn followed, her head up and her mind working. She didn’t know what Potter’s abduction meant, of course, and wouldn’t until she reached the Ministry. In the meantime, she had to consider the Malfoys.

Why has Lucius bothered to come? His wife I can see, certainly, since she has risked so much to help Potter. His son, since Pansy told me that he’s nigh-obsessed with the Potter boy. But what does Lucius think he can gain by attending the meeting himself?

Unless this matter is much deeper than just a simple abduction, perhaps.

Hawthorn smiled slightly, feeling a curl of pleasure uncoil and stretch in her gut. She loved politics, as long as they didn’t happen the day after a full moon, and this time she’d had a few days to recover.

******

Millicent stepped out of the simple cart, which an enormous lizard had pulled for them, onto the wooden platform, and examined the door in front of her. It was made of steel, as though the wizards in the Ministry feared the goblins breaking through. Of course, they might, for all Millicent knew. Though she had not learned much from Binns, she had read enough books on her own to know that goblin rebellions were a large theme of wizarding history.

She glanced back, and watched her father helping her mother out of the cart. Millicent rolled her eyes. She was happy that her parents were going to have another child, of course, and she understood why her father was so proud and so anxious about it, but Elfrida ought to have been able to step out of a damn cart on her own. Not for the first time, Millicent was grateful that she hadn’t been given the puellaris training. Shapeshifting was not worth giving up her mind and her freedom.

The door opened as she watched, and the Auror waiting beyond it nodded to them with awe-inspiring composure, given that she was confronting eight Dark wizards, one of them a necromancer. “My name is Auror Mallory,” she said. “If you will accompany me to the second floor?”

Millicent looked around several times as Auror Mallory led them to the lifts, but saw nothing especially interesting—just desks piled with forms. Of course, if those forms were covered with laws that controlled magical creatures, she could imagine their power. But it wasn’t interesting or exciting or flashy power.

Perhaps it is worth looking into anyway.

Millicent decided to remember that for later. She knew almost nothing about how the Ministry functioned on a day-to-day
level; her history lessons had focused on the Wizengamot and the grand process of trials for Dark wizards. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to study the smaller things, the nitpicky details that escaped all but the most discerning eyes.

Millicent had found many useful things that way. If nothing else, it was how she had first discovered the level of Potter’s power.

They reached the second floor at last, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Millicent saw more to be proud of here, since she recognized the faint tingle of complicated wards about most of the desks. She studied them with a critical eye. Most were wanting compared to the wards of Blackstone, her home, but she could see the attraction of them for Light wizards. After all, they would never have to say that they were using magic so powerful that they were tempted to fall into corruption because of it. The most magic of this level could inspire someone to do was steal someone else’s treacle tart.

They reached Rufus Scrimgeour’s office, and crowded inside. Millicent studied the ring of chairs first. There were ten, enough, she supposed, for the eight of them, Harry, and Professor Snape. But when she lifted her gaze, she saw an elderly man she supposed must be the head of the Auror Office standing against a desk.

*Is Harry not here?*

Not in front of them, but behind them, she realized a moment later, as the familiar brewing-storm smell struck her nose. She turned her head, and saw Harry step into the room, his face pale but composed. Behind him came Professor Snape. His face was also pale, but nothing like composed. Millicent shivered. She would not have wanted to be in a Potions class with his eyes flashing that dark fury.

“What greetings, Malfoy, Parkinson, Bulstrode,” said Auror Scrimgeour, his voice reflecting only a very faint distaste. He had greeted them by family names, as was proper, Millicent thought, looking back at him. “I have agreed to use my office as a place to host a formal alliance meeting between your families and Harry Potter, because Mr. Potter was attacked by Ministry officials working for the Minister himself, and I would like to know what happened as much as you did.”

“But surely you must have the details by now, Auror Scrimgeour?” That was her mother, Millicent knew, her voice soft and retiring. All right, that was one good thing about the *puellaris* training; it encouraged other witches, and especially wizards, to underestimate Elfrida.

Auror Scrimgeour seemed to be no exception. His eyes softened as he looked at her mother. “I do not, Mrs. Bulstrode. Mr. Potter promised to explain everything when we were all assembled.”

Where is Harry? Millicent thought abruptly, craning her neck. He should have made it up to the front of the room by now.

Or, no, wait, of course he had not. He was in the middle of the chairs instead, being hugged to death by Draco. Millicent’s eyebrows rose as she studied the scene. It did have a single difference from a scene of the same kind she might have observed in the Slytherin common room. Harry’s arms were clasped around Draco’s neck and back, and hugging him as firmly as Draco usually embraced him.

“If Mr. Potter would like to start explaining?” the Auror asked, his voice now equally faint in amusement.

Harry simply turned, adjusting the placement of his arm so that it draped around one of Draco’s shoulders instead of both, and led him up to the front of the room. He placed him in the chair underneath photographs of what looked like Aurors capturing criminals, squeezed his hand once, and stepped away. Draco, who already looked calmer than he had when he met them underneath Gringotts, nodded at him, then watched as Harry took his place in the very center of the circle of chairs.

*Standing up*, Millicent thought, as she sat down between her parents. The Parkinsons took the chairs next to them, Lucius and Narcissa the seats next to their son, and Snape and Scrimgeour the ones on the other side of Draco. *He wants to present this to us in full-on formal terms, then.*

Millicent leaned forward, more eager to hear what it was than ever now, especially as she noticed the faint green tinge to Harry’s cheeks, and the slight staring quality of his eyes whenever they rested on anyone’s face but Draco’s or Snape’s.

********

Harry told himself he was calm as he and Snape approached Scrimgeour’s office. He had to be. He had just worked with Rita Skeeter to hammer out the final form of the article that she would release tomorrow in the *Daily Prophet*, and then Snape had found and fetched him. Harry had promised to explain everything when his allies arrived, and Snape had agreed. No one was
forcing him or pressuring him, and he would strike the first blow when the article went into print. Meanwhile, it was only common courtesy to inform his allies and his guardian and his best friend of what would be in the article beforehand.

Of course, all of that was only so much confectionary sugar on the ugly truth. He was nervous because of what his allies would say about his Dark magic and the breaking of his word to the Minister, and because of what would follow if they did not reject him and Harry essentially began a war on Fudge.

There is a storm coming, either way, Harry thought as he stepped into the office and found it full of people, and I must be at the heart of it.

His eyes skimmed past the Parkinsons, the Bulstrodes, and the elder Malfoys, and came to rest on Draco. He could see his best friend’s tense face melting into lines of relaxation and relief as he saw Harry. He probably would have moved forward in a moment to take Harry in a hug.

Harry forestalled that by moving first.

The expression of surprise on Draco’s face was priceless, but far better was the tightness of the embrace Harry received as he tightened his arms around Draco’s shoulders and buried his head in the curve of his neck. A tension he hadn’t realized was there melted away. Yes, there was some concern that his allies might reject him, but at least one person wouldn’t. There were two if one counted Snape, of course, but Harry had a different kind of comfort embracing Draco than he did when embracing Snape.

Draco hugged him back, fierce with delight and relief, and Harry wanted to go on standing there. But needs must, and he pulled away after too short a time and led Draco to the front of the room, placing him in a chair with the promise, given via a squeeze of his hand, that he wouldn’t be far away.

Then he turned around and met his allies’ gazes, one by one.

Scrimgeour was waiting. Snape was tense. Narcissa had a calm expression on her face, as if she could readily accept and forgive whatever crime Harry had to confess. Lucius was utterly blank. Harry could not see Dragonsbane’s face under his hood, and was surprised that the necromancer had come at all. Hawthorn leaned forward in her chair, as thought she would spring and rend the words from Harry before long. The pale woman whom Harry vaguely remembered as Millicent’s mother looked caught between fear and resignation. Millicent herself had a faint, amused smile on her face that her father’s matched.

Harry nodded. Well, come tomorrow, everyone would know a part of the truth, anyway. Perhaps this could serve as practice for the wider publicity that Harry knew he would eventually receive.

“I broke one of the Ministry’s laws without knowing it today,” he said. “I spoke Parseltongue in Knockturn Alley, because some South African hive cobras escaped their confinement and I was afraid they would hurt others. I convinced them to come to the Forbidden Forest with me, where I set them free. Then the Hounds, gray-cloaked wizards saying they worked for the Ministry, came to and abducted me.”

That part had been the easy one, Harry found, as his throat seized up. That part Snape had seen, and told other people. Now he needed to report what, so far, no one but those who had been in the interrogation rooms knew. He struggled to breathe.

Hawthorn unwittingly—or perhaps she did have some inkling, given that she could smell his emotions—helped him over the hard part. “How dare they take a child without his guardian?” she said, and her voice had a trace of a growl in it.

Harry blinked, then smiled at her without humor. “I don’t think the Minister concerned himself that much with legalities, Mrs. Parkinson. I found out soon enough that he took me because he was afraid of my magic. He thought he had a Dark Lord in the making. I don’t believe I was a child in his eyes any longer.”

“He should never have done it,” said Scrimgeour from his corner of the room, “regardless.”

Harry chanced a look at the Head Auror. Scrimgeour sat very still, and his yellow eyes were so intent that Harry felt naked. He struggled to breathe.

Hawthorn unwittingly—or perhaps she did have some inkling, given that she could smell his emotions—helped him over the hard part. “How dare they take a child without his guardian?” she said, and her voice had a trace of a growl in it.

Harry blinked, then smiled at her without humor. “I don’t think the Minister concerned himself that much with legalities, Mrs. Parkinson. I found out soon enough that he took me because he was afraid of my magic. He thought he had a Dark Lord in the making. I don’t believe I was a child in his eyes any longer.”

“He should never have done it,” said Scrimgeour from his corner of the room, “regardless.”

Harry chanced a look at the Head Auror. Scrimgeour sat very still, and his yellow eyes were so intent that Harry felt naked. He had to look away, down at the floor, and started pacing as he resumed his tale.

“The Hounds explained their purpose to me while we waited for the Minister.” Breathe, breathe, and it will not be so hard. “They used to be Aurors, some of them, and others were spies and messengers for Voldemort. The Minister was using their connection to the Dark to seek out other Dark wizards. They wear collars that keep their thoughts from all Dark influences—”
Including ones that aren’t that Dark, said Regulus’s voice abruptly in his thoughts.

Where were you? Harry asked, losing the forward momentum of his conversation for a moment. I thought you’d gone missing.

I was testing the Hounds’ collars, Regulus said, his voice resigned. There really is no way past them, at least not that I can find. Usually, I can pass from mind to mind that has a connection to Voldemort along a sort of tunnel, but this tunnel’s collapsed and had rock shoved into it.

Then perhaps they didn’t have a connection to Voldemort.

I think they did.

Harry shook his head, and realized his allies were still looking at him. He sighed and focused on them again. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Choosing how best to arrange this experience in words has not been easy.”

“Why not?” Adalrico asked, his voice low and dangerous. “What about it was so hard, Harry?”

Harry looked into Mr. Bulstrode’s eyes. This was easier. He looked as if he were all ferocity, considering how this news would affect his family. Harry could deal with that better than more personal concern right now. “I found out that the Hounds are Fudge’s special police,” he said. “His secret police. He’s been using them to track and arrest Dark wizards, at least one other before me. And he’s shoved edicts through the Wizengamot about the registration of Dark wizards that the full Wizengamot didn’t vote for, given the clause that allows the Minister to take control of the Ministry in times of war.”

“We’re not at war,” said Scrimgeour crisply. “And according to Section Two of the Ministry Laws, he has to announce that we are before he can start taking such privileges as the creation of a force of war wizards.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t known that. “Oh,” he said intelligently.

“And then what happened, Harry?” It was Narcissa who asked, voice warm and motherly and caring. Harry focused on her face, this time. He would pretend that she was the only one in the room, and he was talking only to her, he decided. It was the best way to get through this next part.

“The Hounds brought me to the Minister when I announced that I wasn’t going to stop using Parseltongue,” he said. “He told me that I was indisputably a Dark Lord, and I was the main target of the new laws.”

Shock bloomed on Narcissa’s face, and presumably on other faces around him. Harry grimaced and kept his eyes focused forward. “I tried to argue with him, and say that I was loyal to the government of the wizarding world and didn’t intend to take it over. He didn’t listen. In the end, he brought out a silver sphere that would prove my loyalty, if I really had. I put my hands on it, and I did feel magic running through my body. I couldn’t tell what it did, at first.”

He sighed. He would say this without frill, without decoration, he decided. Dressing it up would not make it different from what it was, anyway. “The sphere wasn’t to prove my loyalty. It tried to drain my magic, to make me into a Squib.”

“What?”

The combined cry came from many throats around him, but the one Harry noticed the most was Snape’s, because he had yet to hear his guardian raise his voice. He turned to face Snape, and winced when he found him on his feet, one hand clasped around the wand he didn’t seem aware he’d drawn. “Sir,” he said quietly, “please sit down.”

Snape stayed on his feet. “Why did you not tell us this at once?” he said, in a flat voice that Harry knew covered a rage fit to make him commit murder.

“Because,” said Harry, “of what happened next. I broke free of the sphere before it could drain my magic, and put a body-bind on the Hounds. Then I turned to face the Minister, trying to negotiate my way out of this still, and Dolores Umbridge, the Minister’s Special Assistant, hit me in the back with a spell of some kind. It felt like a small, concentrated Cruciatu——“

“How do you know what that feels like, Mr. Potter?” asked Scrimgeour then.

Harry shot him an annoyed glance. Must he really ask that question right now? “Because I’ve felt it several times,” he said.
“From Voldemort and from Death Eaters, both.”

He saw Millicent’s mother put a hand to her mouth, tears forming in her eyes, but he didn’t have time to figure out why. He had to continue before Snape could do something stupid like insist on checking his back for injury right in front of everyone. Besides, this was the moment when he would find out whether or not his allies would abandon him.

“I let my magic go,” he said quietly. “I created a snake of Dark magic and sent it to fill Umbridge with cold poison that cost her control of her left side. Meanwhile, I coiled a snake around the Minister’s neck that threatened to strangle him if he did anything I didn’t like.”

He closed his eyes and stood still. There was utter silence around him for right now. He didn’t know what would happen, what the first reaction would be, and as moment after moment passed without one, he felt his muscles tighten, his teeth grind, his fingers fold into tense blooms of pain in his hands.

Then someone snickered.

Harry blinked and opened his eyes. Millicent had her hand over her mouth, and her brown eyes sparkled merrily at him above her palm.

“Wish I’d been there to see that, Harry,” she drawled, as she took her hand away. “Merlin! The Minister of Magic, confronted and outdone by a fourteen-year-old boy.”

Harry frowned at her. Once again, it was easier to concentrate on one person at a time, so he didn’t look at the others. “Didn’t you hear a word I said, Millicent? I said that I created snakes out of Dark magic.”

“And didn’t you hear that my family’s a Dark one?” Millicent gave a lazy flap of her hand. “I can see how it might have escaped you, since after all we didn’t attend Walpurgis Night and I wasn’t Sorted into Slytherin.” Her voice, heavy with sarcasm, rubbed his nerves all the wrong ways.

“Regardless—” Harry began.

“What happened next?”

Harry was actually grateful to turn and face Hawthorn, since Millicent was puzzling the fuck out of him. “I explained to the Minister where I stood,” he said. “Then I reversed the damage to Umbridge. But it was too late. I had already discovered that I had enjoyed causing her pain.”

He rubbed a hand along his robes, holding Hawthorn’s eyes, which were calm and encouraging. “I made a bargain with Fudge. I would tell no one what had happened there, in return for his ceasing at once to use the Hounds, pass those ridiculous laws, or steal anyone else’s magic.”

“That was stupid,” said Scrimgeour. “You had no right. We have a right to know what is happening in the Ministry, Harry.”

Harry eyed the Auror sideways. “Why do you think I’m telling you now? Something happened to make me break the bargain. Rita Skeeter somehow saw everything, I don’t know how, and told me that she was going to publish the story. I had a chance to cooperate with her, or not. I chose the cooperation. The story’s coming out tomorrow in the Daily Prophet, minus some details that I thought only my allies needed to hear.”

There was a faint murmur of noise at that. Harry knew what it meant. They were struck that he had trusted them, or been honest with them; Harry himself was not sure which one it would be better categorized as.

“So.” He let his eyes track, one more time, around the circle of faces, playing with too many emotions to let him know for sure what would happen next. “There you have it. I used Dark magic to torture someone, and I broke my promise to someone who would have been an ally. Let that factor into your decision. If any of you want to dissolve your formal alliances with me, I would understand.”

Hawthorn stood up.

Harry looked at her and swallowed. He had hoped she wouldn’t want to dissolve the alliance, but he had no right to gainsay her if she did. He started to roll his sleeve up, so he could reach the scar that was the mark of their binding.
Hawthorn knelt by him in a rush, reaching out to embrace him. Harry stared at her. *What is she doing?*

“I was a Death Eater,” Hawthorn whispered, for his ears alone. “I am a Dark witch. I am—something else that you know well enough, Harry. Did you really think that I or my family would abandon you?”

Harry sighed. “I didn’t know. Mrs. Parkinson. And I don’t know if you should trust me—”

“We do not plan to abduct you, steal your magic, or force you into bargains that would not have held in any case,” said Hawthorn dryly. “Be content with what is, Harry. We stand at your side.”

“My family does, as well,” Adalrico announced, abruptly looming beyond Hawthorn’s right shoulder. “You have proved that you are not intolerably of the Light, Mr. Potter. You will use Dark magic to defend yourself, and that means that you would not condemn us for using it to defend ourselves.” He smiled, his teeth flashing in that same fierce expression Harry had seen in his eyes. “We stand at your side.”

Harry turned slowly and looked at the Malfoys. Narcissa smiled at him, nothing but gentleness in the expression.

“I have put much work into dancing the pavane and the waltz and others, all for your sake, Harry,” she said. “I would not give that up. My muscles ache right now, but my feet will be lighter because of the realization you have come to today.”

Harry stared at Lucius. Lucius simply laughed softly, his eyes feral.

“I do not begin truce-dances only to stop them two steps from the end,” he said. “And the Minister is a much more satisfying opponent than any you have showed me so far, Potter. I accept both the offer to continue the alliance and the opportunity to avenge myself on Cornelius for the insults he has dealt me.”

Harry simply met Snape and Draco’s eyes. He knew he did not have to ask about the continuation of their bonds with him. They would not abandon him.

He looked at Scrimgeour.

The Auror looked back. His yellow eyes and his lion-like mane of hair made him seem formidable even sitting down. Then he shook his head from side to side, as though waking from a dream.

“I have always known that the Ministry was not what I hoped,” he mused. “I have always put up with that, and encouraged the good and discouraged the bad where I found it, and enjoyed my paperwork.

“Now I find that the Ministry is much further from what I am willing to put up with than I ever knew. A Minister who would seize wartime privileges when it is not a time of war and kidnap children who have saved lives and try to steal any wizard’s magic is not one I want to follow, and not one worth keeping bargains with.” Scrimgeour planted his bad leg firmly on the floor and nodded. “If nothing else, I shall enjoy seeing what shit bobs to the surface in the wake of your storm, Mr. Potter, so that I might pluck it out of the water.”

Harry closed his eyes. Then he murmured, “Thank you for listening to me, everyone. I suppose we should go back to Hogwarts?”

“I’m coming with you.”

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at Draco. “I know.”

******

Draco knew that Professor Snape was giving him a disapproving glance. His mother was smiling. His father would reflect a faint tension in the lines around his jaw at the thought of Draco not even asking his permission.

Draco did not care.

He had been able to sit so silently during the meeting because he had been wrestling with the realization that had dawned on him like a personal sunrise when Harry had entered the room and come over to hug him before he did anything else.

He loved Harry, yes, and he had known that for over a year. But this time was the first he had realized that that love was not
entirely that of a friend, or even a brother, which was the second comparison that came to mind.

*Well*, he thought, when the initial shock had passed. *That isn’t entirely surprising. I can live with it pretty damn easily.*

He watched Harry throughout the meeting, the way he spoke the words, the way he forced himself on through confessions that Draco knew would be difficult for him, the way he accepted, with a slightly stunned expression, the offers of the pureblood families to continue their alliances. He contented himself all the while with the fact that only he really knew how hard this was for Harry. He knew Harry better than Professor Snape, better than anyone else would ever know him.

And of course it was only natural that Harry would accept his presence with equanimity, even a smile, the first genuine one he’d given since entering this meeting.

Draco didn’t care that his parents hadn’t given him permission to go, or that Professor Snape hadn’t properly invited him. He was going back to Hogwarts a day early, because he wanted to, and Harry wanted him to. Draco couldn’t imagine a pair of better reasons in the world.

*******

Hawthorn raised her eyebrows as she watched the glances exchanged between the Potter boy and the Malfoy heir. *So. Pansy was right. Well, that alliance will be a benefit to all of us, I think. At least we’re unlikely to lose Potter to some Light wizarding family that might convince him to become a Light Lord.*

She could feel her own heart pounding harder and harder, much as it did when the full moon rose and the transformation began. The future lay before her, much more exciting than it had been only this morning. By tomorrow, Skeeter’s article would be out, and while Hawthorn knew it would not contain as much detail as Potter had given them today, it would be an attack on the Minister. Fudge might be pried from his incompetent perch at last.

And then the wizarding world would go into political chaos—chaos that a forewarned, clever, politically savvy pureblood could certainly exploit to her own betterment and her family’s.

*And for the benefit of allies, as well,* Hawthorn thought, gaze turning back to Potter. He sang with power, radiated it, rang with it. She always forgot, when she had been away from him for a time, how strong it was. *And if Narcissa is right, we shall have something much better than a Lord, something we have never had before, something entirely new.*

It was all she could do not to howl.

The future was near, and it had never looked better.

*_*\_*\_*\_*\_*\_*

**Interlude: Minister Illegally Kidnaps Child**

*The Daily Prophet*

*September 1st, 1994*

**MINISTER ILLEGALLY KIDNAPS CHILD**

**Brother of Boy-Who-Lived Abducted By Minister Fudge**

*By: Rita Skeeter*

At approximately 1:30 in the afternoon yesterday, a pair of wizards working for Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge abducted Harry Potter, 14, the elder twin brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, from the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

“They called themselves Hounds,” said Potter. “They’d even named themselves after dogs. Grim was one, and Crup was the other.”

He said that he’d been afraid when this reporter caught up with him yesterday.

“I didn’t recognize either one of them,” said the teen, who celebrated his birthday and his brother’s only a month before his
abduction. “But I think I could point them out again if I had to.”

Potter described being brought to a blank interrogation room, where the Hounds explained their purpose to him. Essentially, it appears that the Minister of Magic has been granting the authority of a secret police to these Hounds, and that they are authorized to hunt down Dark wizards who have broken the new laws calling for Dark wizard registration.

As was widely reported last year by this very newspaper, Harry Potter is in possession of the rare Dark talent Parseltongue, which he used yesterday in Knockturn Alley to contain a quiver of deadly South African hive cobras.

“I’d had to register myself as a Parselmouth a few days before,” explains Potter. The registration included a requirement that he stop using Parseltongue. Potter refused to sign this form on the grounds that it did not grant him equality under the law—no other registration requires that the Dark wizard in question stop using his or her talent—and left the Ministry.

It seems that the abduction was motivated by Potter’s use of Parseltongue in Knockturn Alley.

“I spoke with the Minister,” said Potter. “He told me that my situation was different because I might become a Dark Lord. I asked him why, and he said that because I’m a Parselmouth, I’m linked to You-Know-Who. Then he told me that he would give me a chance to prove my loyalty to the government of wizarding Britain.”

Potter said that he was eager to take the chance, as he was bewildered and hurt by the Minister’s accusations.

“I mean, I know that people are afraid of me because I’m a Parselmouth,” said the fourteen-year-old, who is currently under the legal guardianship of Professor Severus Snape, who was not permitted to accompany him to the Ministry. “I just didn’t expect that it would take any form this extreme. I thought I’d have a chance to go on trial in front of the whole wizarding world and answer the accusations against me fairly. I trust the Wizengamot. I’m sure they would come to the right decision.”

The “test,” described by Potter as Minister Fudge’s replacement for Azkaban now that no Dementors attend the island, was a large silver sphere with holes in it, sitting on a tripod about three feet off the floor.

“Madam Umbridge told me that I would just have to put my hands on the sphere, and I would be given the chance to show my loyalty,” said Potter. Madam Dolores Umbridge is the Special Assistant to Minister Fudge, who has overseen many of the new Dark wizard registration laws.

When Potter put his hands on the sphere, nothing happened at first. He said he could feel magic moving through him and binding his fingers in place, but as long as nothing hurt him, he trusted Minister Fudge and Madam Umbridge to do right by him.

“I knew I’d been brought there without my guardian, and rather suddenly, but I just couldn’t believe they would really hurt me,” he said.

The sphere, however, apparently tried to drain Potter of his magic. As Harry Potter is currently the most powerful young wizard at Hogwarts—second only to the great Albus Dumbledore, if we may take his explosion of magic on the Quidditch Pitch last November as sufficient testimony—this was quite painful for him.

“I drove the sphere’s magic off and broke the sphere in so doing,” said Potter. “That wasn’t my intention. I think I frightened the Minister and Madam Umbridge with that, if they weren’t already frightened before.”

The Hounds tried to attack Potter at this point, but he says that he imprisoned them with Petrificus Totalus. “I didn’t want to hurt them,” he explains.

Minister Fudge stood in front of Potter, and Madam Umbridge behind. At this point, Madam Umbridge cast what was later identified, from the wound on Potter’s back, as the Lamina Alba hex, last made famous when Bartemius Crouch authorized the Aurors to use it on Dark wizards during the War with You-Know-Who.

“I didn’t know what it was,” Potter admitted. “I just knew that it hurt like a small, concentrated dose of Cruciatus.” Potter has experienced the Unforgivable Curse several times now, mostly at the hands of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban in March and have so far eluded the Ministry’s Aurors.

The sudden pain and the fear and anger that Potter himself was feeling inspired him with a desire to strike back. He turned and loosed some of his magic in the form of a snake at Madam Umbridge. “Since I’m a Parselmouth, the snake form just seems to come naturally to me,” he said.
The snake paralyzed Madam Umbridge with several cold bites, while a second snake kept Minister Fudge from interfering.

“It was over in five minutes,” said Potter. “Then I reversed the damage. Madam Umbridge can walk again. I would be sorry if she couldn’t. I don’t know why I did that. I was on overload, I think. I’d gone through an abduction, an interrogation, and the sphere in one day. I’m sorry.” He shuddered when he spoke with this reporter. “And then I’d had to confront being called a Dark Lord. But that’s no excuse for acting like one.”

Potter was later rescued by the Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour, and the arrival of his guardian, Professor Severus Snape.

Potter said that he didn’t particularly want the attention that he knew would follow from this article, but that he felt a duty, however reluctant, to inform the wizarding world of the truth.

“I just don’t think that one boy can handle this alone,” he told the Prophet. “I might be magically powerful, but there’s a lot I don’t know, and I don’t trust myself to make the best decision, so I should submit to the judgment of my elders. The public should know, so they can make up their own minds.”

Sources that asked to remain anonymous have confirmed many parts of Potter’s story, including the removal of a large silver sphere that can drain magic and matches Potter’s description of the device used on him from the estates of Starrise, a powerful Light wizarding family, several weeks ago, and Potter’s abduction by two former Aurors, Gamaliel Gorgon and Falstaff Morologus, who were sacked for gross negligence of their duties.

Minister Fudge and Madam Umbridge have so far been unavailable for comment.

“I hope they speak up soon,” said Potter. “I would love to know their justifications for what they did.

“I just hope they have a reason good enough to justify abducting a fourteen-year-old from his guardian. But I’m sure they do. After all, Minister Fudge is the Minister of Magic, and ultimately accountable to the whole of wizarding Britain, not just one young wizard.”

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eleven: Stung Into Storm

Harry sighed and sat back, flexing his hand slowly open. It hurt from the long time he’d spent gripping the quill, more so than the time he’d spent writing. He’d had to think for long minutes before he discovered the perfect things to say to James, Connor, and Remus. Each letter had to be different, just long enough to convey that he was all right without worrying them with too much detail, and informed by the knowledge of being mostly apart from them for a month.

Connor can keep this part of leadership, Harry thought, as he sealed the last letter and turned to look apprehensively at Hedwig. Hedwig cocked her head and hooted indignantly, as much to say that she could too carry three letters to the same place, and Harry had been a fool to doubt her.

“Sorry, girl,” Harry whispered, his hand smoothing down the feathers of her chest. “Nerves, I guess.”

He found twine in the drawer of the table beside his bed, and used it to bind the three letters strongly to Hedwig’s leg. He made sure the name on each envelope was clearly visible, then nodded and sighed and told her, “Lux Aeterna, girl. James, Connor, Remus.”

Hedwig flipped her wings open and took off, shining in the dim light of the dungeons. Harry heard a brief hooting squabble before Snape opened his door for her. He closed his eyes and pictured her skimming up through the dungeons, heading for the Owlery.

“Harry.”

Harry let out another sigh. The departure of Hedwig meant that he had finished his letters, and so the time that Snape and Draco had agreed to let him spend alone was over. He glanced towards the door, and found Snape already standing there.

“Yes, sir?” he asked.

“We have things to speak of.” Snape sounded as certain as he had been the day he told Harry he was staying at Hogwarts for
the rest of the summer, but this time, there was no happiness or amusement in his voice. It sounded dry, purged to dust.

Harry nodded, and looked past Snape to see if Draco was there. Draco slipped around the professor a moment later, and made a zigzag line for the desk where Harry sat. Harry stood up and hugged him one-armed. He’d sat for long enough on the hard chair, and figured he should at least be able to sit in comfort for the discussion that was coming.

He sat down on the bed, with Draco beside him. He looked up to meet Snape’s raised eyebrows, but they went down again in a moment, cutting off any hope of a reprieve.

“You were once again in danger today,” Snape noted.

Harry shook his head slightly. “I am always in danger,” he said. “I think that the sooner you learn that, the better.”

Snape ignored him. “It was danger that could have been prevented in one respect, Harry. I think it is time that you learned to resist someone trying to Apparate with you. It would not have stopped everything that happened, perhaps, including exposure of the Minister’s corruption, but at least you would have been able to remain free and out of the Hound’s grasp.”

Harry blinked. “I didn’t know that resisting Side Along Apparition was possible, sir.”

“Of course it is, for a skilled Occlumens,” said Snape, waving one hand as though Harry should have known that already. “You will have noticed that Side Along Apparition is different from doing it on your own—that the sensations are more dizzying, for example.”

Harry nodded, and moved closer to Draco when his friend tugged with one arm. Harry relaxed when he felt the warmth seeping in from his side. “I always feel more likely to be sick after a Side Along Apparition,” he said.

“That is because the space through which wizards Apparate influences one’s mind when one is not in control of the spell,” Snape said, falling into lecture mode. “Such perceptions can be manipulated. Just as an Occlumens can refuse to let a Legilimens enter his mind around his shields, he can refuse to let those perceptions do the same thing, and thus resist being pulled along.”

Harry half-closed his eyes. “So I’m resisting the spell or the person casting it, sir?”

“Both,” said Snape. “Now. I want you to concentrate on that, practicing it, when next you feel up to it.” He nodded curtly to Draco. “Come, Draco.”

Draco blinked. “What--?”

“We should let Harry sleep,”

Harry frowned at Snape. “It’s only nine,” he said. “I’ll be able to stay awake for at least a little longer.”

Snape simply waited, and a moment later, Harry’s jaws cracked under a yawn. Harry sighed. “Yeah, all right,” he said, and shoved regretfully at Draco’s shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

Draco touched his forehead for a moment, as though checking for fever, and then nodded at him. “See you tomorrow, Harry. I’m so glad you’re alive.”

The last was a soft murmur, and before Harry could react properly, both Snape and Draco had left, Snape shutting the door firmly behind them. Harry stretched his arms and went to prepare for bed. At least tomorrow was the day the students arrived at Hogwarts, not the actual first day of school. That gave him some time to prepare.

And it’s the day Skeeter’s article comes out.

Harry’s mouth twitched into a small smile. I thought time to prepare, not time to relax.

I have no idea why Snape had to tell you to go to bed, said Regulus abruptly. You’re half-collapsing already. Go to sleep, and stop thinking ridiculous things like this.

Yes, Father, Harry said with sarcasm that not even Regulus could miss. He wouldn’t call Regulus’s nagging like a mother’s,
since that still brought up a bit too much pain.

*******

Snape kept most of his attention tuned to the passive link between him and Harry as Draco, hardly needing the encouragement, chatted about the parts of his summer he’d spent with Harry at Lux Aeterna. He was in the middle of reliving a broom chase when Harry relaxed in Snape’s mind, and he felt him lapse into sleep.

“Draco,” said Snape, interrupting Draco mid-sentence and winning a glare for that. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something for a while now, something concerning you and Harry.” Never mind that he had only noticed properly that day. Draco would believe in him more if he thought that Snape thought this was an ongoing problem.

“What is it?” Draco stood up at once, his body all but vibrating with tension. “Has he said something about me? Did I hurt him in some way, something that he can’t tell me about face-to-face?”

Snape shook his head slightly. Yet more signs of obsession. He does not even strike close to the real truth. “No, Draco,” he said, and made his voice be gentle with an effort. “It is related to you more than it is to Harry. I have become concerned over the amount of time and thought that you spend on him. You seem to have almost no life of your own, outside of him.”

Draco stared at him, then blinked lightly. “That’s not true, Professor Snape,” he said. “I spent lots of time at home this summer. I played Quidditch by myself and with some of the other boys from Slytherin—Blaise and Vince came over all the time. Not Gregory, though,” he added, with a faint frown. “I studied history and pureblood rituals with my mother. I tried saying thank you to house elves, but Harry’s wrong about that, it just makes them burst out in tears. Except Dobby, but he’s strange anyway.”

“Then why do you never speak about the time that you have spent playing Quidditch or studying history with others?” Snape inquired. “Why does every word out of your mouth concern Harry?”

Draco shrugged impatiently. “Because the time I spent around him was just more interesting.”

Snape nodded once. “That is one of the signs of obsession, Draco. Even in a simple statement about what else you have done this summer, you cannot keep Harry out of it. I have seen the way you look at him—“

Draco’s shoulders stiffened so fast that Snape was left wondering what he had done. Draco’s voice was low and harsh. “And you disapprove? You’re going to act like some crusty old wizarding parent telling me that your son can’t possibly love whom he wants to because he has to continue the line?”

“What?” Snape asked blankly. Then his brain caught up with his ears, and he scrutinized Draco, narrow-eyed.

It is worse than I thought, he concluded after a moment. The boy has a crush, but he’s convinced that this is some kind of grand passion for the ages.

“Listen to me, Draco,” he said quietly, and the force of his tone, more than what he said, he thought, pulled Draco’s eyes to his. “I do want to see Harry happy. That much is true. But I do not want to see you sacrifice your own happiness, your freedom, for his. Neither would he want that. He has had enough of sacrifices in his life. And as you stand now, you could sacrifice everything for one smile from him and think it justified. I will not let that happen. What will happen if he chooses to love elsewhere?”

Draco’s expression turned into mulishness blended with something else, something genuinely frightening. “He won’t,” Draco said, his voice a low hiss. “I’ve always been here. There’s no one else that he cares for as much as he cares for me. Besides, it’ll probably be a while before he can love anyone else that much. He told me that last year, that he’d never thought of anything beyond the end of the war but continuing to serve his brother. But when he can look around and choose on his own, I’m going to be there.”

“So you’ll wait until he notices you?” Snape asked, and shook his head when Draco nodded. “And you’re going to act like some lovesick young witch in Spain pining for her lost true love to come back from the wars?”

“I am not like that.” Draco was upset enough that Snape felt a stirring of power rise around him, promising a headache in a few moments. “You take that back. I do intend to win Harry’s love if I can.”

“You are thinking of permanence,” Snape said quietly. “You are too young for such things, Draco. You are fourteen.”
“You treat Harry like an adult.” Draco folded his arms and scowled.

“Because he *acts* like one,” said Snape, patience suddenly at an end. “Listen to me. I will watch you closely from now on. If you do not show some signs of independence by the end of September, then I will assure that you *have* it, whether you want it or not. Do you understand me?”

Draco just stared at him.

“I can assign detentions,” said Snape. “And that is only the beginning.”

“You don’t have the right to do this,” whispered Draco.

“And you don’t have the right to choose to smother yourself beneath the clinging blanket of some crush—“

“It is not a crush—“

“—simply because you wish to,” Snape finished. “I will not allow it, and Harry, if he notices, will not allow it.”

“I don’t want to tell him,” Draco spat, his face turning crimson. “I don’t want to tell him that his guardian’s being an unreasonable, stubborn old wanker.”

Snape raised an eyebrow and nodded once. “Very well. I will leave it up to you to tell him. You have until the end of October to do that.”

“That’s not fair—“

“Neither is what this crush might lead you to do, Draco, either to yourself or Harry,” Snape cut him off. “Now, go get ready for bed.”

Draco glared at him for a moment longer, but Snape had practiced, and received, much harsher glares than this young Malfoy was capable of. After a while, Draco went off to use the divan in Harry’s room, muttering to himself under his breath.

Snape ground his teeth and moved off to create light wooden targets, so that he could take out the many frustrations of the day.

*Why must I be the one to notice and take care of things that any reasonable parent should have noticed long since? Narcissa must have, though Lucius could be blind to such things. What did she think she was doing, encouraging the boy?*

******

Albus finished reading the article on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, and then put the paper down. His hands shook, very lightly. He did not allow himself to notice.

*That’s torn it.*

For long moments, that was the only thought that would come to him. He sat in blankness of mind and stared out his window, past Fawkes’s old perch. It was a magnificent day, brighter than it should be on the first of September, really, with the sun rising to embrace the sky. The children would be arriving that evening, and there were a thousand things to be done beforehand.

But, as well as being the Headmaster of the school, he was the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and those were the thoughts storming through his head, when they finally began to storm.

*Harry cannot maintain peace. He cannot maintain a balance. He has already begun to change the wizarding world, and who knows when he will stop? The Wizengamot may not have been contacted and told that Fudge intended to pass new laws or that we were in a state of war, but those are minor offenses, ones that would at least leave the government of wizarding Britain intact. It might even have worked in our favor, because the preparations would be in place when our true war with Tom begins. I was willing to let those happen, as long as the wider public did not notice.*

*Instead, Harry tips the balance, and now nothing will be the same again.*
Albus closed his eyes. The mornings when he felt too old for politics were rare, but this had decided to be one of them. He could feel every ache in his joints, the faint stiffness in his back that not even long nights on a soft mattress could cure, the desire to simply sit back and hand off any important decisions to someone else. That last was an especially dangerous desire, because there was no one who could take up the decisions and confidently handle them.

Harry, his mind reminded him.

Never Harry, he answered firmly. He is probably going to be votes, I must admit, and he was the one who deflected Voldemort’s Killing Curse. I can allow him no other role than that, not when his first political move in public is as disastrous as this one is. There were a thousand more graceful ways that he could have handled his abduction. Instead, he crashes through long years of elegant, hard work like a gorgon in a china shop.

I must distract him from participating in the larger political life of the wizarding world.

And Albus thought he knew the perfect distraction. He stood and turned to the chest behind his desk, which held various of his Pensieves that he had arranged in neat alphabetical order. His hand hovered over the M section, and then pulled out the Pensieve labeled, in neat letters, My time with Falco Parkinson.

******

James had just unfolded the Daily Prophet when he felt the tingle in the wards that announced an owl coming through. He waited for a moment, and was beyond surprised to see Hedwig skim through a window and land on the table in front of him, hooting urgently. James unbound the letters, noted the different names on them, and laid them gently down on the table.

Neither Remus nor Connor was awake yet; they’d had a hard, final dueling session last night, since Remus wouldn’t be able to train him for at least another few months.

“Thank you, Hedwig,” he said, offering her a bit of the bacon from his plate in reward. “I’ll be sure to read them in a moment.” He went back to unfolding the paper.

Hedwig hit him on the head with a wing. James ducked and eyed her. Hedwig went on dancing and leaping, her hoots growing more urgent.

Ah, she wants more bacon. James handed her a larger piece. The snowy owl was engaged in swallowing it for a moment, and meanwhile, James was able to take a bite of his porridge and unfold his paper in peace.

A moment later, his porridge sprayed across the front page.

James sat back, put the paper on the table, closed his eyes, and rubbed his face. Several times. He rubbed circles on his forehead, his cheeks, his chin, and his throat. It was a calming exercise his grandmother had taught him. When he asked what it was for, she’d said, tartly, “To deal with unruly children.”

When he looked again, though, the story was still there, and Hedwig was tilting her head to glare at him with one golden eye, as if to say, “You should have opened the letter when I told you to.”

James shook his head and read the article, carefully. Then he slit the letter that bore his name open and looked at it.

Dear Dad:

I know that you might have seen the article by the time you read this. I’m sorry. I’ve told Hedwig to deliver it as fast as she can.

I was abducted by the Minister, but I’m fine. I was going to keep quiet about it at first, but I was convinced by a friend that I wanted to spread the word. I know that reporters might descend on you now. I’m sorry about that.

You can tell them that you don’t know anything more than what’s in the article. That might be best.

I promise, Dad, that I’m fine, and that Professor Snape’s vigilance, or lack of it, had nothing to do with the abduction. The Hounds said they were from the Ministry, that I’d broken a few laws to do with use of Parseltongue, and that they wanted me to come along with them. One of them even assured me that I’d be allowed to bring Snape along, and then snapped me up in a Side Along Apparition before he could get near enough. Professor Snape’s promised to show me how to resist being
Apparated against my will.

I've missed you, but I thought there must be a reason that you weren't writing to me this summer, that you were angry at me, or angry at Professor Snape, and wouldn't reply, so I didn't. I hope that you do reply to this letter. I'd still like us to be a family, Dad. I felt a little too crowded this summer, but perhaps we could try with Christmas?

Love, Harry.

James sat back and loosed a long, angry, hissing breath. Harry’s letter rambled a bit, but it included several things that James had longed to hear: that he still wanted to be part of the family, that he was fine, that he was sorry for possibly involving James and Connor and Remus with reporters.

But that wasn’t enough to distract James from the obvious, something that should have been obvious even to Harry.

Snape still failed him as a guardian. Harry was kidnapped right in front of him, and he didn’t do anything to stop it.

James shook his head and stood. He should have done this long since, not given up after one attempt, but he had had Connor to look after and Harry to brood about. Now Connor was going back to school, and Harry wanted to be part of the family again, and James could concentrate on getting one over on his enemy.

He was going straight to the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, to insure that he got custody of his son back.

******

“Sir! Sir! Please come quickly!”

Rufus carefully put down his morning cup of tea, and considered hexing whoever was beyond the door. Then he reminded himself that everyone in the Auror Office knew enough not to disturb him during his morning cup of tea, and more likely than not, that meant it was something truly urgent.

Drawing his wand, he strode across his office and opened the door. A young Auror with vividly pink hair and an unfamiliar face stood there. Thanks to the hair, Rufus recognized her anyway.

“Auror Tonks,” he said. “Is something the matter?”

“The Minister, sir! He’s screaming in his office, and sometimes sobbing!” Tonks waved her hands in agitated circles, taking a step back, and tripped over a chair. She promptly smashed into Auror Mallory’s desk, and upset the inkwell. Rufus closed his eyes in resignation as ink dripped onto her hair. Tonks continued in a more subdued tone. “Sorry, sir. But he sounds like he’s in pain, and we can’t open the door.”

“Coming,” said Rufus, with a slight growl, and locked his office behind him. The one time he hadn’t done that, someone had stolen his tea. Rufus could not abide people who stole his tea.

He followed Tonks grumpily across the office, and everyone found a reason to be elsewhere. Of course, it seemed as though a good many of his people were already missing. Rufus shook his head and snorted. All pounding on the Minister’s door and telling him pretty please to let them through?

“Why hasn’t someone opened the damn door with a Blasting Curse?” he asked Tonks, as they reached the lifts.

The young woman gave him a glance of terrified admiration. “Sir? That spell’s illegal.”

“Doesn’t tell me why they haven’t used it,” Rufus muttered, and rubbed discreetly at his hip. He was almost sixty years old, and on a morning before his tea, no matter how bright and warm the day was, the old injury that had given him his limp flared up. Crises simply shouldn’t happen before there’s tea.

“The door’s, uh, locked with some sort of spell that reacts when we try anything more violent than an Alohomora.” Tonks shrugged helplessly and, stumbling as she got into the lift, managed to press the buttons for all the levels. “Sorry, sir.”

“It’s all right,” said Rufus, and leaned on the lift wall. The gentler way down was better for his hip, anyway.

When they reached the level of the Minister’s office, Tonks took the lead, as though Rufus might not know where it was.
Rufus strode—he *strode*, he did not *limp*—after her, muttering under his breath.

He found the Aurors clustered around in front of the Minister’s door, timidly knocking and calling. Rufus stepped past them and laid his wand on the door.

“*Alohomorana,*” he murmured. It was a variation on the Opening Spell that his grandmother Leonora had taught him. She was Muggleborn, with no sense of pureblood pride at all, and had always proclaimed that there was no reason for doors to be locked among family, which had led to a string of embarrassing incidents when Rufus’s father was sixteen or so.

He opened the door.

The volume of noise was instant and terrific. There must have been silencing charms worked into the wood of the door itself, Rufus thought, sagging back and struggling not to put his hands over his ears.

Once he made out what the noise was about, though, his grumpiness vanished, and he wanted to cackle like his grandmother.

“—*NEVER BEEN SO EMBARRASSED BY ANYTHING IN MY LIFE!* I WOULD MOVE TO FRANCE IF I WERE ASSURED THEIR GOVERNMENT WAS ANY BETTER! NO, WAIT, IT COULDN’T POSSIBLY BE WORSE! I THINK I’LL BEGIN PACKING AS SOON AS POSSIBLE! AT LEAST THEIR MINISTER DOESN’T ABDUCT INNOCENT CHILDREN WITHOUT TWIRLING HIS MOUSTACHE FIRST, I SHOULDN’T THINK!”

Rufus watched in amusement as that particular Howler tore itself to pieces, only to be followed by another from the growing pile on the Minister’s desk. This voice, Rufus happened to recognize from the meeting in his office yesterday. Hawthorn Parkinson did a good imitation of outrage, he thought.

“I AM STUNNED, STUNNED AND APPALLED! I HAVE NEVER HEARD OF SUCH A LOW INCIDENT IN MY LIFE, MINISTER! ARE NONE OF OUR CHILDREN SAFE IN THEIR BEDS? WILL YOU SEND YOUR HOUNDS AFTER MY DAUGHTER? THAT POOR INNOCENT BOY! I THINK IT IS TIME THAT WIZARDING BRITAIN HAD A NEW MINISTER!”

Fudge was huddling at his desk in the midst of it all, whimpering softly.

Rufus cleared his throat in the pause between Parkinson’s Howler ending and another starting. Fudge looked up at him hopefully.

“That was a complicated locking charm,” said Rufus, and then he shut the door and let the spell snap back into place.

He turned to his team and shook his head solemnly. “Too bad that we couldn’t rescue the poor man,” he said. “At least now we know they were only Howlers.”

“But why?” asked Auror Mallory, her pretty face concerned. “I don’t understand what all of them were yelling about.”

“Read the front page of the *Daily Prophet,*” Rufus told her, and strode back towards his office, his mood lighter than it had been without his tea in a long time. Of course, knowing that he was going back to his tea helped.

*And after that, I can start digging.*

When he got back to his office, he had a second pleasant surprise waiting for him, besides his tea. Two of his people stood with a third held between them, his head dangling sullenly. He looked up when Rufus neared, and Rufus recognized him as Gamaliel Gorgon, one of the sacked Aurors that Fudge had been using as his so-called Hounds.

“Crup, I presume?” Rufus asked indulgently.

Gorgon sagged.

*******

“What’s so interesting about the front page, Mother?” Blaise covered a yawn with one hand. Her darling son had always had such exquisite manners, Arabella Zabini thought fondly. Of course, she had been the one to teach him, and not any of her husbands, which was probably the reason. “I didn’t think you found much of interest in the *Daily Prophet* normally.”
“This,” said Arabella simply, and passed over the paper so that he could see. She herself had already read the article four times, with each pass looking for a different layer of meaning, and believed she had found them all. Her lips seemed permanently fixed in a smile this morning. *Clever boy.*

*And it makes that letter I received yesterday all the more pathetic.*

Blaise blinked at the headline and said, “Goddamn.”

“Blaise,” Arabella chided, looking around the sitting room. She had worked hard to find all the prettiest portraits for her little home. Unfortunately, many of those pretty portraits were easily offended high society witches, and they were turning now to glare at Blaise. “Language.”

“Sorry, sorry,” her son muttered, and went back to reading. When he looked up, his eyes were narrowed. “Do you really think—I mean, did this really happen?”

“At least some of it did, my darling,” said Arabella. “After all, I do not believe that either Potter or Skeeter are stupid enough to create a story that could be so easily disproved.”

Blaise nodded, his eyes glowing. “Will this mean a new Minister?”

“That is the least of what it will mean.” Arabella leaned over and kissed his forehead. “Now go get your breakfast from the house elves, and we’ll discuss this further when you come back. I don’t want you halfway to falling asleep when we do.”

“Yes, Mother,” said Blaise, with a perfect little bow of his head, and trotted to the kitchens.

Arabella chuckled at the article and then moved towards her writing desk. Yes, she did think, rather, that answering the letter with a regretful negative was the wiser course.

*Not to mention that I may have something of my own to offer in an alliance with Potter, while this other would make me only a servant.*

Her gaze brushed across the shelf of books written in Parseltongue, and then back to the writing desk, at which she sat with a stretch of her hands and a toss of her long, dark hair.

It was a *glorious* morning to be alive.

*******

“Here they come.”

Harry rolled his eyes at Draco’s statement of the obvious, but nodded. “Here they come,” he repeated, and locked his eyes on the carriages rolling towards Hogwarts’s front doors. At the corner of his vision, the tiny lighted boats carrying the first-years bobbed across the lake.

The carriages were all drawn by thestrals, who snorted and tossed their wings when Harry looked at them. Harry looked uneasily away again. He hadn’t yet spoken to any thestrals, and suspected he wouldn’t be able to without help. He wondered what they would want from him, what kind of freedom they would ask.

It *probably depends on why they’re bound, doesn’t it?*

*Well, whatever it is, it can’t be any worse than the letters I’ve received.*

Harry winced. He had not foreseen that Skeeter’s article would result in a flood of post of his own. He’d had a few Howlers, accusing him of being an attention-seeker, but far fewer than he thought he would. And there were countless outpourings of sympathy, boxes of Chocolate Frogs, offers to adopt him and keep him safe, declarations of outrage that the Minister would kidnap an innocent child, sniffling admirations of his bravery, and on and on. Harry was beginning to think that Skeeter had played up the angle of his innocence and his youth too much.

The lead carriage had just about reached them—Harry and Draco stood not far in front of the entrance to the school—when Regulus snarled in his head. Harry turned at once, spinning a complete circle and letting his hand fall to his sleeve, where he carried his wand, by reflex. “What is it?”
Harry felt his own lips part in a snarl. He had thought that Dumbledore had found and sealed all the holes in the Hogwarts anti-Apparition wards that Sirius had torn or told the Death Eaters about last year, but it seemed he’d missed one.

He turned to face the carriages again, and then saw her, Bellatrix Lestrange, laughing loudly and absurdly. She stood beside an open carriage, one arm linked around the throat of a pretty, black-haired girl in Ravenclaw robes. The girl was gasping and struggling to fight back, but Bellatrix muttered something, with a wave of her wand, and she went limp.

“Harry!” Bellatrix screamed, her voice thin and quite mad. “Murderer! Are you going to face me? Or shall I have all the babies?” She smiled at the children still in the carriage, and their shrieks of terror rose, blending with cries from elsewhere. “Mine to pluck like ripe fruit, aren’t they, yes?”

Harry moved slowly forward, his hands clearly spread in front of him. He felt Draco at his right shoulder, and snapped, “Stay back.” Draco halted, flinching.

Harry faced Bellatrix, noting the way she held her hostage in front of her, so that she had a human shield against most of the hexes and jinxes that Harry might throw. She was also handy with a Shield Charm, come to that. Harry’s mind was racing now, filled with fury and filled with disgust.

“What kind of tactic is it, to involve children in our fight?”

“You want me, Bellatrix,” he said. “I’m the only one you want. Let her go, and you can have me.”

Harry waited, waited, waited. He had the answer now, since he didn’t think Bellatrix was any good with wandless magic. But he needed her to move her wand away from the Ravenclaw girl’s throat, and he also needed to make sure that she retreated, instead of just grabbing hold of her hostage, as she would if he simply disarmed her. He decided to try a taunt. He snorted.

“And do you really think you can take me, Bella?” he asked. “I destroyed your lord and your husband easily enough. In fact, I only had to strike once to destroy them both.”

Bellatrix snarled and jerked, extending her wand towards him.

Harry narrowed his focus to her hand, her wand, and thought as hard as he could, compelling the spell to follow to a single point.

*Sectumsempra!*

Snape’s cutting spell flew. Harry could feel its tense soaring across the grass between him and Bellatrix, and had a moment to reflect that if he had misjudged, it would also slice the Ravenclaw girl to shreds—

He had not misjudged.

Bellatrix’s right arm exploded in a fountain of blood, her right hand and wand flying free. Harry saw the jagged slice of bone, severed to stick out of the stump that had been her right wrist. Bellatrix screamed and staggered back, lost in the pain, releasing her hostage as she moved.

Harry didn’t hesitate. “*Wingardium Leviosa!*”

The Ravenclaw girl skimmed towards him, past the wheels of the carriage, and Harry caught her and laid her gently on the ground. Then he lifted his eyes back to Bellatrix, certain that she would retreat, but ready to give battle if she did not.

Bellatrix stared back at him, clutching the ruin of her right arm, and Harry had never seen such pure hatred in anyone’s eyes before.

“My Lord will have you,” she whispered. “And I will.”

Then she Apparated out.

Harry let out a harsh gasp and bent over the Ravenclaw girl, hearing Draco come up behind him as he slapped her cheeks.
Her eyes fluttered and opened as Bellatrix’s sleeping spell loosed its hold on her.

“Hush,” Harry told her gently when she opened her mouth to scream. “She’s gone. You’re safe now.”

The girl nodded shakily at him and sat up. “Did you rescue me?” she whispered, and Harry nodded again. “Thank you.”

Harry had time to give her a smile and step away from her before someone’s hand clasped him firmly on the shoulder, a clasp just this side of pain, and an unfamiliar voice said, “What’s this, then?”

_*.*_.*_.*_.*_.*_

Chapter Twelve: The Old Mastiff

Harry turned with the grip on his shoulder, gaze fixing on the man who stood over him. He tried, automatically, to meet the man’s eyes, but found it unexpectedly difficult.

Of course, one of the eyes was a blue coin rolling around to the back of his skull, which would have puzzled even Snape on how to meet it, Harry thought. The other was dark, but piercing, and looked through Harry as though judging him for the Dark spell he had just used.

Harry knew where he was when he looked at the man’s face and saw the scars that twisted over every inch of skin, and the nose that looked as though someone had taken a hammer to it. Add to that a wooden leg replacing the real one, and Harry was on firm ground. “Auror Moody,” he said.

The man’s hand loosened on his shoulder, and Moody let out a blistering laugh, shifting his weight onto his good leg. “Not Auror any more, boy,” he said. “Retired. And your new Defense professor, at Dumbledore’s request.” He studied Harry for a moment with a grim smile, then pulled the collar of his robe away from his neck. “And I suppose it’s only fair that you know about this.”

Harry blinked when he saw the silver gleam of a collar that was similar to the ones the Hounds wore.

Regulus snarled in his head. _Maybe he was the one I sensed before, as well as Bellatrix. I think he must have a connection to Voldemort of some kind, Harry, but that damn collar is in the way. Can you ask him to take it off?_

Harry blinked again and met Moody’s eyes; the blue one had rolled into the front of his skull to stare at him. _You ask him._

“Heard that you had a bit of trouble with former Aurors wearing collars like these,” said Moody expansively. “You don’t have to worry, boy. I was the one who made them, back when we had to face real Dark wizards every day, not bored children like Fudge and fourteen-year-old Parselmouths.” He spat. “These ‘Hounds’ copied my design. I don’t take mine off, but I’m also not under Fudge’s control.” He smiled, and his eye spun wildly. “Just so that you know.”

Harry nodded at him, then turned and knelt over the Ravenclaw girl again. He supposed that Moody had some other reason for coming over than just to speak to him about the collar, but since the professor was done talking, Harry intended to see the girl to the hospital wing.

“What’s your name?” he asked, as he helped her to her feet.

“Harry,” Draco whined.

“Cho Chang,” said the girl, with a faint smile at him. “And you’re Harry Potter, of course. No need to ask that.”

“Harry,” Draco insisted.

Harry balanced Cho on his shoulder—she was taller than he was, but considerably lighter—and peered at Draco. “What?”

Draco was watching Cho with an expression of intense distaste, but, Harry thought, that was nothing new. Draco seemed to be jealous of any other person who touched Harry for so much as a second. “Can’t Professor Moody take her to the hospital wing?” he said. “I think that you should get back inside the wards. There was just a Death Eater here, in case you forgot.”

Harry blinked. Yes, he had forgotten. And now that he thought about it, he wondered how he could have. The image of
Bellatrix’s arm erupting in blood and bone was vivid, just waiting behind his eyes to pounce him.

He shuddered and glanced at Professor Moody, who had stalked over to the bloody mess on the ground that was Bellatrix’s hand and wand. He prodded at them for a moment, then knelt with a grunt and a splay of his wooden leg. Harry watched in sick fascination as he unfolded the fingers from the wand.

“Don’t want to leave Death Eaters’ wands lying about, boy,” he said, wagging the long black stick at Harry. “Nasty business. I’ve known more than one of them to be a death trap for enemies.” He drew his own wand and waved it at the one he held. “Inopia!”

The wand shivered once, and than a cage of blue force built around it. Harry shivered.

Perhaps she’s good at wandless magic after all, he thought, to Apparate away after leaving her wand here. Or perhaps someone else snatched her.

Or perhaps Moody had something to do with it, Regulus suggested in his head. I don’t think I trust him, Harry.

Like I said, said Harry, readjusting Cho’s weight on his shoulder, you can be the one to ask him if he can bare his left arm and show you the lack of a Dark Mark. I’ll believe his story about the collar for right now, until I learn otherwise. A Hound wouldn’t be stupid enough to come in openly wearing the collar, anyway.

You never know, Regulus muttered, but he fell obligingly silent.

“Sorry about this,” Harry said to Cho, as they started to walk towards the school. Cho was recovering with every step of the way, but Harry didn’t like the way she breathed. She must have at least a slight case of shock, from being so suddenly snatched and used as a hostage like that. “Even with what tends to happen around me, that was a bit extreme.”

“I’ve been reading the papers over the summer,” Cho assured him as they walked up the front steps of Hogwarts. “I thought this was practically normal for you.”

Harry gave her a surprised glance, and then snorted when he saw the smile curving her lips. “Practically,” he agreed. “But this is the first time that I’ve ever really managed to wound a Death Eater, instead of the other way around.”

“Good,” said Cho. “I wouldn’t want her to get away unharmed for attacking me.”

Harry reevaluated the girl as he helped her limp down the corridors to the hospital wing (it seemed she’d also twisted her ankle when Bellatrix flung her to the ground). Cho was already recovering, color flushing her cheeks again, her head coming up and a faint grimace of embarrassment twisting her mouth whenever she looked at Harry. Harry supposed she was stronger than she looked.

Of course, she plays for Ravenclaw, doesn’t she? he recalled abruptly. Their Seeker. She would have to be less delicate than she looks.

“Harry.”

Harry blinked and turned around. Draco was in the hallway behind them, panting as though he’d run to catch up with them.

“Professor Snape wants to see you right now,” he said. “I’ll take Chang the rest of the way to the hospital wing.”

He glared at Cho, who blinked back, frowning slightly, as though she didn’t know what she’d done to earn Draco’s enmity. Harry rolled his eyes. The jealousy was rising off Draco like steam, and he would have wagered many things that this was only a ploy to get him away from the girl.

He can calm down. No one else is going to become a better friend to me than he is.

Harry would have wagered that, and refused to abandon Cho, if Draco hadn’t chosen Snape as the excuse. Snape would have assigned Draco detention in moments if he found himself being used in a trick like that.

That meant he really did want to see Harry.

Harry nodded apologetically to Cho. “Professor Snape is my legal guardian, and I sort of have to do what he says. If you don’t mind—“
“Not at all,” Cho assured him. “I told you, I read the papers. And I think it’s wonderful that Professor Snape is looking after you. Obviously, the Ministry can’t be trusted to make the proper legal deposition for you.” She squeezed his hand, giving him a sympathetic smile.

Harry nodded back to her, with a smile in return. At least there’s someone in the world who doesn’t think Professor Snape is an unfit guardian. He turned and trotted in the direction of the dungeons, while Draco took his place at Cho’s side.

Draco waited until Harry was out of sight and earshot before he spoke. He’d walked with Chang, of course, and the idiotic girl had tried to make a few stabs at conversation, but he ignored them. He was just making sure there was no chance that Harry could hear them.

When he was certain, he turned and glared straight at Chang. She’d opened her mouth to say something else, but she closed it now and watched him with her eyebrows drawn down. “What’s the matter?” she asked after a moment.

“Stay away from him,” said Draco softly. “Stay away, do you hear?” It was a blunter threat than he might have made otherwise, but he could still see the way that his aunt had faced Harry, and the surge of pride and terror he’d felt on seeing Harry’s Dark spell. It was wrong that Harry had felt forced to defend the Chang girl like that. He didn’t want to use violent spells; Draco knew he didn’t. And that spell was not only violent, it was also Dark. Draco knew, if Harry didn’t, that the sympathy of the wizarding public was as easy to lose as it was to gain. Let word get out of him doing Dark spells, and more people might swing back to support the Minister.

Chang shrugged at him, uncomprehending. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Malfoy,” she said. “At the very least, I owe him thanks for saving my life, which I’ll present to him more formally later. And it looks like he knows a lot of magic. I’ve never even heard of that spell he used on the Death Eater.” Her dark eyes sparkled with a Ravenclaw’s curiosity. “I could probably learn a lot from him.”

“So you are planning on talking to him again?” Draco demanded.

Chang lifted one of her eyebrows. “I would think that would be obvious.”

Draco drew his wand. Chang took a hobbling step backward, supporting an obviously twisted ankle, but didn’t draw her own. She just watched in fascination while Draco hissed at her, “I don’t want you coming near him again.” Once again, he felt compelled to be blunt. Harry had actually been talking with the girl, smiling at her. He had obviously been comfortable in her company. There weren’t many people Harry was comfortable with. Draco didn’t want the circle to expand further.

Chang didn’t back down, to Draco’s fury. She simply watched him with her head on one side, the skin around her eyes pulled tight in a frown, as though trying to figure out why he would do this.

“Promise me,” Draco whispered, one of the nasty little hexes that his father had taught him an inch from his lips.

“I think that you should ask Harry about that,” said Chang calmly, not moving. “After all, does he usually let you choose his friends for him? There was nothing in the papers about that.”

Draco’s fury grew. Her words forced him to think back to Snape’s pronouncement yesterday evening, that he was acting irrational. He didn’t want to think that he was acting irrationally. He was the only one who knew the actual depth of his love for Harry, and that meant he was the only one who had the right to make decisions based on that.

“I mean it, Chang,” he said, striving for a tone that would permanently scare the girl. “Stay away from him.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Are you going to help me to the hospital wing or not?”

Draco studied her. She was avoiding his eyes now, and making odd little grimaces of pain as she hopped, obviously trying to avoid supporting weight on her ankle. Draco noted that she hadn’t said she would stay away from Harry.

Well, she hadn’t said she wouldn’t, either. Draco was content, for now, to put his wand away and help her, so that he could tell Harry he had, later. If she came near him again, then he could hex her without remorse.
“You wanted to see me, sir?” Harry asked, putting his head around the door of Snape’s office. In truth, he was shocked that Snape was still here. He’d have expected him to be at the Sorting Feast by now, overseeing the introduction of the new Slytherins into his House. But perhaps the Sorting Feast had been delayed for the Death Eater attack. Harry wouldn’t have put it past Dumbledore to make sure everyone was calmed down and could properly enjoy the food and the Sorting, perhaps with some of his compulsion.

“Yes,” said Snape, his voice quiet. He was watching a bubbling cauldron, full of a clear potion that Harry didn’t recognize. “I want to know why you used the spell that you did against Bellatrix Lestrange.”

Harry winced. He really didn’t think his guardian was angry. He sounded weary, which was worse. “It was the best one I could think of,” he answered honestly. “I thought she could resist an *Expelliarmus*, and I wanted to cause enough damage that she would retreat from the field permanently.” He shrugged. “Making her leave her wand behind was just a bonus.”

Snape turned around. Harry blinked. He had never seen that particular expression on his guardian’s face before, rather as if Snape had watched him drop off a cliff and then winds levitate him back up. It was a fortunate coincidence, but one couldn’t count on it to happen again.

“Sir?” Harry whispered.

Snape strode across the room to him and stared down into his face. Harry stared back, craning his neck to do so.

“I have accepted that you are in danger from moment to moment, whatever you may think of me,” Snape began quietly. “I have accepted that many of those dangers, I can do nothing about. I can only make sure that you know the spells and the defenses that you will need to survive them.

“But there is one danger that I can make sure you do know about, Harry, because I was in the thick of it from the time I was seventeen to the time I was nineteen.”

Harry blinked. “When you were part of the Death Eaters, sir?”

Snape bowed his head with a sharp slashing motion. “When I was willingly a Death Eater,” he agreed. “I used Dark spells before any other kind. I struck with the same kind of motivation that you used on Bellatrix tonight—that I had to make sure I killed or wounded my enemies before they could do me any harm. Oh, I told myself I was fighting to protect innocents, so that no pureblood child would ever have to know any harm from Muggles, but an excuse was all it was in the end.”

Harry swallowed. “Sir,” he said, his voice wavering, “I hardly think you need to worry about me becoming a Death Eater.”

“That is the one thing I will never fear from you,” said Snape, his voice going dry for a moment. Then it sobered again, into that tone that was frightening on its own, because Harry had never heard it from Snape before. “But I think I do need to worry about you using Dark spells, violent spells, as solutions to your problems. You are powerful, Harry. You could have done many things to Bellatrix other than cut off her hand. Why did you choose that instead?”

Harry shook his head. “I—don’t know. It seemed to fit, once I’d thought of it. Cause her pain, make her retreat, and render her harmless to anyone else. But then she Apparated out, so maybe I haven’t rendered her harmless.”

Snape nodded again. “We all had abilities that we hid,” he said, as if musing. Harry held his breath. Snape rarely talked about his time among the Death Eaters. “It may well be that one of Bellatrix’s was wandless magic, or at least the ability to Apparate without the spell. There are a few other times that has happened.” He focused on Harry again, and his eyes glittered, bright and sharp and present. “If you *will* use Dark spells and study the Dark Arts, and not just the defense against them, then you will do it with me. You are still less experienced with offensive magic than other kinds, Harry. You could have slipped up tonight and sliced the Chang girl, and if someone had not got to her in time, she would have bled to death. And with the Dark magic yesterday…” Snape shook his head. “I take it that I need not tell you how dangerous that was.”

Harry winced. “Yes.”

“Go to the Feast,” said Snape, still quietly. “I will be along in a few moments. And remember, Harry. With Dark magic as with any other kind, you need to know and understand it *before* you use it, not afterwards.”

Harry bowed his head, then slipped out of the office. He made it a few steps up the hallway before he stopped and leaned on the wall. He was shaking.
I really didn’t think, did I? Just reached out and chose that spell, and then focused it on Bellatrix’s hand. Snape is right. There are less dangerous things I could have done, both for myself and for those around me.

If I’m reckless with Dark magic the way I was with my life last year, then I stand to hurt not only myself, but other people. I never want to be like that.

He stood, straightened his shoulders, and went to the Feast, grateful for the company of chattering voices at the Slytherin table and Draco’s warm press against his shoulder as he slid into the seat beside him.

*******

“Harry!”

Harry turned around, with a smile on his face, as Connor ducked under Ron’s arm and hurried towards him. He and Draco were on their way to breakfast, and Harry could feel his friend shifting impatiently beside him, but he could certainly spare a few moments to greet his brother. He’d smiled at him across the Great Hall last night, but had had no chance to get away. All the Slytherins wanted to talk to him about his summer and his abduction and his use of Dark magic and what spell he’d done in saving Cho.

Connor hugged him, roughly, and Harry was a bit surprised to realize that they were of a height now. Connor’s hair had also gone slightly wilder, as though trying to look more like Harry’s, and flopped back and forth over his heart-shaped scar as he held Harry back a short distance and examined him critically.

“You’ll do,” he said at last. “I suppose Snape’s been feeding you properly?”

Harry rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. He thought both Connor and James must think that Snape was feeding him on grave dirt and cobwebs, or perhaps James just thought that and had given the impression to his brother. “Yes, fine. Not as fine as the meals at Lux Aeterna, maybe, but more interesting. We eat while we’re discussing potions sometimes.”

Connor wrinkled his nose. “Harry, try not to bore me to death before we even get to class, all right?” He turned and walked beside Harry into the Great Hall, ignoring both Draco’s attempt to shove him away and Ron’s prompt and growing spat with Draco. “Lux Aeterna was boring without you,” he confessed in a murmur. “Dad and Remus tried, but there’s only so much dueling you can do before it gets boring. Same with reading. And sometimes Remus wouldn’t duel with me—”

“Near the full moon?” Harry asked. They were near the point where they would have to split to go to their House tables, but he decided, abruptly, that he wanted to sit with his brother this morning, custom be damned. There was no actual rule that someone from Slytherin House couldn’t eat at the Gryffindor table, so he strolled over with Connor and sat down with a nod at the various other people gathered there, listening as Connor talked to him.

“Well, yes, then, of course.” Connor piled his plate high with pancakes and handed the platter to Harry, who mimicked him. He seemed to be hungrier lately than he had ever been in his life, Harry thought dimly. “But sometimes he sat around and relived memories of the First War and said that he wished Sirius was alive to help train me, that that was the only way I would ever gain a greater understanding of some of the spells.” Connor winced. “I think he wanted me to be in deep mourning with him half the time, and laugh half the time to help heal him of his grief.”

Harry stifled his irritation that Remus would ask that of Connor. Remus probably hadn’t even realized he was asking it. And it wasn’t Connor’s fault that he wasn’t the type of person to lie around on his bed for weeks and refuse to eat when he was grieving someone. “That does sound boring,” he agreed around a mouthful of pancakes. “I was relieved to hear that you’d got home all right from the World Cup. Did you suffer any injuries when the crowd started running?”

Connor shook his head, looking faintly amused. “That Ill Wind curse roused protective instincts in Dad. I think it sent him back about fifteen years, to when he used to be an Auror. He grabbed me, ran to the nearest Portkey, and got us out right away. Luckily, he went to Lux Aeterna and not somewhere else.”

Harry nodded. “I thought something like that might have happened, but I wasn’t sure.”

“Harry, what are you doing?”

Harry blinked and looked up at Draco, who sounded far more indignant than he should, given that Harry hadn’t run out of his sight or battled any Death Eaters this morning. “Having breakfast,” he said.
“With them?” Draco made it sound as though the Gryffindor table was thick with flobberworms.

Harry caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned his head. The Weasley twins were sitting a few seats down from Connor, and had turned to watch Draco. A speculative gleam lit their eyes. Harry winced. “Um, Draco,” he said, “some of them are my friends, too, and a lot of them are Connor’s friends. Yes, I wanted to have breakfast with them.”

Draco folded his arms. “Well, I don’t want you to have breakfast with them.”

Harry rolled his eyes and turned away, taking a bite of the pancakes. It was best just to ignore Draco when he was like this. He would get past it soon enough, especially when he saw how unimpressed Harry was with his childish behavior.

Draco’s hand abruptly latched onto his shoulder. “Come on, Harry,” he hissed in his ear, sounding furious. “Let’s go back to the Slytherin table, where we’re at home and we belong.”

“Harry doesn’t just belong there,” Connor spoke up. “We all read the papers, Malfoy. Harry dashed into danger at the World Cup to save everyone else. I think that’s pretty damn Gryffindor.”

He looked along the table. Surprised, Harry followed his gaze, and saw other people nodding, or at least not looking as if they disagreed outright. Neville Longbottom caught his eye and gave him a shy smile.

“Yeah,” he said, loud enough to make just a few people turn to him. He coughed and repeated himself. “Yeah! Harry was brave, and I think that means that he can sit here if he wants.” He flinched then, as if expecting to be attacked by a pride of rabid lions, but Hermione, looking up from her book just then, nodded firmly.

“Yes, he can,” she said. “And I want to know more about the Ill Wind curse, Harry, and what you did to counter it.”

Harry relaxed. Having a discussion of what Rosier had done in the abstract was just the thing he needed to keep the memories of what it had been really like at bay. “Well, the Ill Wind curse affects the mind, so there are a few ways of fighting it. I used the Ventus spell on Draco. That clears his thoughts with a wind from my own thoughts, which had resisted the spell. But you have to look someone directly in the eye to do that, so of course it’s of limited use with that many people. The other solution is Finite Incantatem, but—”

Draco abruptly seized his shoulder and yanked, hard. Harry released his fork and plate in time for them to land on the table, but his spoon went flying across the room and hit someone else on the head, provoking a startled yelp.

Harry tensed his muscles and called up his magic, breaking free of Draco’s grip with a twist. “What the hell are you doing?” he snarled at his friend, straightening up and brushing at his robe where Draco had knocked it askew.

“We are going to eat at the Slytherin table,” said Draco. “I don’t like being here.”

“Then go sit down at the Slytherin table.” Harry had to fight to control his anger. Draco had always been protective of him, but, in this case, there was nothing to be protective about. The Gryffindors were being perfectly pleasant. “I’ll join you for lunch, I promise you.”

“Oh, does poor ickle Draco not feel at home at the Gryffindor table?” one of the Weasley twins crooned abruptly. “Don’t worry, we’ll make it all better for him.”

Harry turned just in time to see the twins make flinging motions with their hands, wrists snapping in unfamiliar motions. Two small objects flew towards Draco, exploding at his feet. Trails of scarlet smoke raced into the air and curled around Draco, hiding him entirely from sight for a moment.

When the smoke cleared, most people stared and began roaring with laughter. Harry could even hear chuckles coming from the Slytherin table.

Draco now had hair in shocking shades of Gryffindor red and gold. His tie was striped in the same colors, with a prancing lion in the center of it, which paced and roared quite realistically. His robes had gone gold in the top half, scarlet in the bottom, and appeared to be covered in stars, from the way they glittered.

Harry shook his head. The twins really were magical geniuses. Harry could have willed that effect into being, maybe, but he could not have combined the dozens of small spells they would have had to combine to produce it.
The twins were half-collapsed over the table, they were laughing so hard. Even Connor had joined in, though Harry thought he had tried to resist, for his brother’s sake. Neville was blinking, but other than that, the only one at the Gryffindor table not laughing was Harry.

Draco stood where he was for a moment, face Gryffindor red with humiliation, then turned and ran out of the room.

Harry tried to find it in himself to feel sorry for Draco, and couldn’t. Draco had been asking for it. It was one thing to complain and moan and grumble about the Gryffindors—most of Slytherin House had done that, at some time or another—but another thing altogether to try and tug Harry away when he’d agreed to have breakfast with them. Harry rolled his eyes and turned back to his pancakes, hoping that the twins’ enchantments would wear off soon.

“Harry?”

Harry blinked and turned around. He’d been so occupied with watching Draco and the results of the prank that he hadn’t noticed a small delegation approaching him from the Ravenclaw table. Cho was in the lead of it, but behind her were a girl that Harry vaguely knew from his own year, Padma Patil, and Luna. Harry smiled at Luna, who gave him a slow, dreamy smile back.

“Hi, Cho,” said Harry. “Has your ankle recovered?”

“Madam Pomfrey healed it in an instant, thank you,” said Cho. “But I did not yet thank you properly for what you did in saving my life.” She inclined her head and held forth a silver plate that Harry took in bewilderment. He studied it. It was round, with a pattern of what he thought were trumpet flowers along the sides. He had never seen anything like it that he could remember.

“My family has been dedicated to the Light for generations,” said Cho, solemnly, and turned to take a small object from Padma. “But that does not mean we cannot recognize the old magic of sacrifice and life debt. We simply choose a different means to acknowledge it than blood.”

She set the object in the center of the plate. It was a dish, Harry saw, also silver, with its sides worked as petals. It was also empty, but it tingled with magic when it was set down, and then sealed itself to the center of the plate. Harry balanced it carefully. It really wasn’t much heavier than the plate alone had been, and he had to marvel at the craftsmanship.

“I choose to acknowledge my debt with water and with air, with earth and with fire,” Cho went on, utterly serene, as she took a pitcher from Luna. She turned around again, and Harry realized for the first time that she wore a silver clip in her long dark hair, shaped like a trumpet flower itself. “Metal from the earth, forged with the aid of fire, and water that has fallen from the sky.” Carefully, she poured the pitcher’s contents into the dish.

Harry saw it was rainwater, silver and trembling. It landed in the dish and rippled for a moment, then stood utterly still. Cho extended a hand towards plate and bowl and water, and whispered, “Memento vitae.”

All three objects promptly began to shine with a white light so brilliant that Harry had to shield his eyes. When he could see again, they had become a silver bracelet, edged with a pattern of trumpet flowers, and trembling in color like rainwater. Harry held it up and stared at it.

“I—thank you,” he said.

“I owe you my life,” said Cho simply. “This is a reminder of it. If you are ever in danger, touch the bracelet and repeat Memento vitae. I will hear it, or a member of my family will if I cannot help you, and we will come.” She fixed her dark eyes on Harry’s face, and waited to hear what he would say.

Harry nodded and clasped the bracelet around his wrist. “Thank you. I will wear it with pride.”

Cho bowed once, and then turned and walked back towards the Ravenclaw table, Padma and Luna following her. Harry turned and sat back down, blinking, at the Gryffindor table.

“You have to teach me Light rituals,” said Hermione abruptly, shattering the silence. “There’s so much I don’t understand!”

Harry, relieved, joined in the laughter this time.
Snape narrowed his eyes as he stood to make his way to his first class. He had seen the pressure Draco put on Harry, and he understood it, probably far better than either boy did.

He would not be able to use detentions, either to give Draco more freedom and time apart from Harry, or to simply separate the boys. He would have to give Draco something to occupy his time alone, something special and personal and answering to his interests.

A certain Potions book, waiting patiently on the shelf in his office, contained the answer.

~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Thirteen: Scorpions of Ice

“—And stay out!”

Harry flinched and backed away from the door to the fourth-year boys’ bedroom, shaking his head. Draco glared at him one more time, still from beneath a shock of red-and-gold hair—no one had managed to reverse the twins’ enchantment, and Snape had given Draco a detention for bursting out shouting about it in Double Potions—and then slammed the door. That made Harry’s ears ring again.

“Surprised, Potter?”

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Blaise Zabini was sitting half-sunk in one of the large, comfortable green couches in front of the hearth, his Charms book propped on his lap.

“Somewhat, yes,” said Harry flatly, dropping into the chair across from Blaise. “By a number of things.”

Blaise grinned and stuck a finger in the page of his book. “Come on, then, Potter. Tell me about them.” He cupped a hand around his ear and waggled his fingers back and forth. “No one ever said I wasn’t good at listening.”

But you never really cared to listen before, Harry thought, and glanced again at the shut door. Probably it was only Draco’s spectacular outburst that had earned the attention of the most standoffish member of Slytherin House’s younger years.

Harry shrugged. Draco, now probably sprawled on the outermost of the room’s four beds and scowling at the ceiling with his hands folded behind his head, was not going to give him any answers. If Blaise would, then Harry could put up with his generally irritating and condescending presence.

“All right. First question.” Harry brought his gaze back to Blaise’s face. “Why is Draco so angry at me? I tried to reverse the enchantment, and I told him what Cho’s bracelet meant when he asked.”

Blaise clucked his tongue. “But you didn’t do it quickly enough, Potter. And you didn’t do what would really have pleased him. And Malfoys are accustomed to being pleased, you know.”

“Then I’m asking about that, too.” Harry ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “I must have made some big mistake with him, but I don’t remember what it was. He was fine just a few days ago, when—“ He realized just in time that revealing the meeting with his allies to Blaise would be a tactical error. He had met Blaise’s mother only once, on Walpurgis Night in the spring, and there was no reason to think, yet, that she was interested in an alliance. He continued the sentence as smoothly as possible. “When he saw me after the Minister’s attack. And since then, we’ve been together every moment, except when he ran off after breakfast and I went to see Professor Snape yesterday evening. I don’t know what could be bothering him.”

“You’re not paying as much attention to him as you used to, of course,” said Blaise, sitting back in the couch and looking at Harry as if he were an idiot. “Would you have gone and sat with your brother at breakfast last year?”

“My brother was an idiot most of last year,” said Harry. He wasn’t sure what felt better, being able to admit that or knowing that Connor’s idiocy was mostly in the past.

“So, you wouldn’t have,” Blaise poked.
“No.”

Blaise nodded. “So Draco might think that he’s losing you to other friends, or that he could.” He extended a hand in front of him and flipped it over. “And then you didn’t come after him when he fled the Great Hall.”

“He’d done an idiotic thing,” said Harry flatly. “And I wanted to stay and talk to Connor and the other Gryffindors.”

“I’m sure you did,” said Blaise. “And it would have been… undiplomatic to appear to run from Chang just when she was approaching to offer you a formal thanks. So I agree about that.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “In case it escaped you here, I’m asking for help, Blaise. What else should I have done?”

“I suppose that depends on whether you’re thinking like a Malfoy or not.” Blaise dropped his Charms textbook altogether and linked his hands behind his head. *He’s enjoying this,* Harry realized. Of course, Blaise had long said he got off on other people’s pain; he even took Care of Magical Creatures mainly to enjoy the moments when one of Hagrid’s pets got out of control and bit someone else. “According to Draco, you should have come after him immediately. Malfoys are used to getting what they want. Someone interested in allying with the Light families would say that you should have stayed and negotiated with Chang the way you did. Your brother would probably say that you should have spent time with him.” Blaise shrugged. “What do you think, Harry?”

Harry cocked his head. *Remember, he’s the son of a Dark but unaligned witch. And he’s testing you now.*

Harry had been aware of the glances the other Slytherins gave him ever since he got back into the House common room yesterday. Most of them were sidelong or sneaked, and some were accompanied by smiles and some by frowns, but the one thing all of them did was weigh and measure. Harry knew that some of their families were Dark and unaligned, some Light and unaligned, some undeclared. Some were the children of Death Eaters. Harry would have to remember the affiliations of each and every member of Slytherin House he talked with, especially someone like Blaise, whom he didn’t know well.

Luckily, his mother’s training had honed him for that.

“I think that I should have done exactly what I did,” said Harry, “seeing as it was what I did, and I have to live with the effects whether I like them or not.”

Blaise’s face relaxed into a small smile. “I can at least appreciate the cleverness of that,” he said.

Harry shook his head, and resisted the impulse to say that it wasn’t cleverness, just truth. *Let your enemies think they know more of you than they do, and fill in the gaps with their own inventions.* That particular thought came along with his mother’s voice, her intonation, and he put the pain aside, too. “All right. So Draco has to remain a volatile ingredient for now. Second question, then, or set of them. Where’s Greg?”

Blaise’s face tightened, and then drained of all expression. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Harry snorted. “It’s true that I don’t spend all that much time with Greg or Vince, but I do notice when one of them is missing, Blaise. I know that he’s not attending Hogwarts this year. Why?”

Blaise fidgeted with his hands in his lap a moment. “What makes you think I know anything?” he asked.

“Because you tensed up when I asked.”

Blaise said something under his breath that was probably a curse. Then he said, “Look, Harry.” Harry blinked at the sudden switch to his first name, and then realized that it had probably been meant to throw him off-guard. “I do know. That much is true. But there’s also a reason that no one has mentioned it around you yet.” He looked up. “Political reasons.”

Harry made himself relax, even smile. “I hope I’ve shown I’m very much open to allying with Dark wizards and witches.”

“Yes,” said Blaise. “And that helps. But you’re also the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, and blood speaks louder than actions or oaths for a lot of the older families.” He leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes slightly, lowering his voice until it was barely more than a whisper. “Harry, we know that you’re your own side, in a lot of ways, but we also know which side you’re never, ever going to stand for. We’re not stupid.”

It didn’t take Harry long to make the connection, after that.
Voldemort. The Death Eaters. Greg’s father was a Death Eater, and only cleared on the word of Lucius Malfoy.

His father has removed him from school because he doesn’t want him sleeping in the same room, in the same House, with the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived. Or maybe he just wants to get him out of the way of the war. But either way, it’s the only reason no one would mention him around me.

Harry opened his eyes fully and looked at Blaise. The boy was giving him a cool look, but beneath the surface, it had an awful lot in common with the gaze of a trapped hare. Either way he leaped, he had a lot to fear from the two sides.

Harry gave him a grim smile. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I know what you mean. And I won’t tell anyone that you told.”

Blaise let go his tension, bit by bit. “Thanks, Potter,” he muttered. “From anyone else, I’d wonder what they wanted, but you…I just believe you when you say that, you know?” He sounded faintly disgusted with himself.

“I wish other people would,” muttered Harry, with a glance at the door to their room, and then stood. At least his schoolbag was still in the common room, where he’d dropped it after Charms that afternoon. He might as well get started, both on the more mundane homework that he could easily pretend to be average at and on the complicated Potions research that Snape had set him—and on his own efforts to improve the Calming Potion. There had to be a way, even if twenty years of research hadn’t found it.

******

Draco lay on his bed and stewed.

No, he lay on his bed and seethed. The other word sounded too common, too plebian, for his grand and overpowering rage.

It had not been a good day. After the debacle of breakfast, he had found that he couldn’t reverse the twins’ enchantment; in fact, trying only made his hair and his robes begin to radiate scarlet and gold auras. Then he had encountered Harry as they went in for Potions, and Harry had refused to apologize for sitting at the Gryffindor table, and had shown off the life debt bracelet from that bitch Chang, and totally failed to understand why Draco was so upset with him. Draco had yelled at him, as was within his rights, and Snape had given him a detention.

Then the enchantments wouldn’t come off for the rest of the day. When Draco made his way back to the Slytherin common room, Harry had followed him. At first, he had been gratifyingly apologetic, but then he had asked what he had done to make Draco so upset. Draco had shoved him out of the room and locked the door so that he could be alone.

And to top it all off, he thought as he shot a glance at the clock, he would now be late for his detention with Snape if he didn’t hurry.

Forcing himself to his feet with a groan, Draco unlocked the door and stormed through it, giving deadly glares to anyone who dared to look at him. He’d tried changing robes, but found that the twins’ enchantment was somehow anchored to his skin, not his clothing; the new robes just acquired the red and gold hues, too, and a new tie acquired the lion. And nothing at all could be done to restore his hair.

And Harry was gone, too, instead of being there for Draco to glare at.

It just was not fair.

Draco stomped to Snape’s offices in a huff, and knocked firmly on the door, and stood there with arms folded, waiting.

Snape opened the door. He looked at Draco with the same deeply uninterested gaze he’d used during Potions, as though nothing Draco did or said or wore could possibly matter, and said, “You are late by two minutes. Come in.”

Draco stamped inside and then whirled around as his professor shut the door. Snape at least knew certain inalienable truths about, among other things, Draco’s feelings for Harry. He might deny them, but he knew them, and that made him safe to yell at in a way that Harry wasn’t. He also didn’t make Draco hurt quite so much when he snapped back. “Why didn’t you do something to the Weasleys?” he yelled, waving his arms. “Two of them hexed one of your Slytherins right in the Great Hall, and you didn’t so much as take off five points!”

Snape merely watched him, head on one side, body still. It crept in on Draco, distantly, that he had never seen his professor
so devoid of movement. It reminded him of the way he had seen his father once or twice, when—

When he had been sitting in his study, contemplating the Dark Mark on his arm.

Draco swallowed and took a step backward. The indignant bubble he had lived in all day popped, and he realized that he stood in a room with someone infinitely more dangerous than Snape had ever been. Snape’s rage had always been low, he had almost never raised his voice, but now it was cold, too.

“I will not take off points,” Snape began at last, after five more moments of silence in which Draco could clearly hear his heartbeat, “when the Weasleys have done a service to the school in chiding the idiocy of one of my Slytherins.” The emphasis he gave that one word was icy; there was no other term for it. Draco felt his cheeks pale in fear, rather than flush. “No, Draco, you must learn better. You will learn better. I will undertake your instruction myself.”

“What do you mean?” Draco whispered.

Snape took a single gliding step forward, though it wasn’t really a glide, not the way Draco had always thought of his professor’s movement in the past. Instead, he simply disappeared from one place and appeared in another, it seemed, suddenly, and much closer to Draco. Draco fought the nervous urge to shuffle back, but he could not combat the urge to swallow. Snape studied him with black, flat, dead eyes, the way that Draco thought a spider might contemplate a fly in its web.

“Your behavior embarrasses our House,” said Snape. “Your obsession weakens you. Your carelessness could endanger Harry. For these reasons, and others, I am going to make sure that you change, Draco.”

He abruptly turned and strode out of the room, through a seldom-used door that Draco knew led to his library of books he did not want students come on detentions to see. Draco stood there, dazed, blinking, for a moment, and then followed.

Snape had already selected a book from the shelf, and he tossed it underhanded to Draco. Draco caught it, and stared at it. Medicamenta Meatus Verus, it read. Draco’s mind translated the title without really thinking about it. Potions of the True Path.

“What is this?” he asked, blinking at Snape. He’d thought of some forbidden Potions or Dark Arts book when Snape had first mentioned that he was going to change Draco’s behavior, but he didn’t recognize this title, and he knew all the famous ones.

“A test,” said Snape. “And a binding. And a project for you, to lead you out of the shadows you insist on putting yourself in, into light.” His mouth twitched with something too chill and faint to be called a smile. “Or into true darkness, if you wish to think of it that way.”

As though it had taken Snape’s words to let him become aware of it, Draco felt the magic of the book then. It sang beneath his fingertips, purring power that was watching him and aware of him, but not going to do anything to him until he opened it.

He opened it.

Draco watched in terrified amazement as his fingers skimmed past several pages, riffling them, until they settled onto one in particular. It felt—right as his fingers came down on that page, and the magic was purring loud enough to make the book vibrate now. Draco looked at the title of the potion.

He felt his face flush, but he shook his head. “That isn’t—a potion doesn’t exist,” he whispered. “It can’t possibly.”

“And why not?” Snape had moved forward so that he loomed over Draco.

“Because my father would have found it, if so.” Draco stared at the page, and felt the scars tear off an old, old wound. “He was furious when I turned ten and I still hadn’t shown any signs of being sympathetic enough to his own magic to become his magical heir.” Draco could still hear his father’s words, yelling, the one time he had ever seen Lucius lose control. There has been a magical heir in the Malfoy line for the last thirteen generations, and that will not stop now! But nothing could be done about it; either Draco’s magic was enough like his father’s to receive Lucius’s abilities and knowledge on his deathbed and showed signs of being so early in life, or it was not and did not, and Draco’s was the latter. Lucius had grown resigned to a late manifestation in the years that followed, but never quite given up hope, though Draco knew his hopes dipped lower and lower every year. “I—this isn’t—he would have learned of this potion if it were real. This is a hoax, a trick.” He turned to look up at Snape, his eyes narrowed, his brain feeling free of fog for the first time since he had realized he was in love with
Harry. “Why are you playing a trick on me?”

Snape stood looking into his eyes for a long moment. Draco watched his face tighten. Then he nodded firmly at the book.

“It is real, I promise you,” said Snape. “As for why it is not more widely-known? The author of this particular book was a brilliant Potions Master, but not regarded as such by her colleagues, because she did not achieve her results in any traditional way. In bitterness and revenge, she recorded her finest discoveries here and hid them away from the world. My—inheritance was lucky to include the book.”

Draco regarded the potion for a long moment. Then he said, “Sir? Have you used it?”

“I was unable to.” Snape sounded entirely unemotional. “The potion relies on purity of blood as well as sympathy of magic. My mother was pureblood. My father was a Muggle.”

Draco felt his mouth drop open. He had not guessed it, although he had known, in the back of his mind, that Snape did not come of an established pureblood line. After all, there was no family named Snape. But he had not thought that—well, that Snape’s blood was tainted quite that recently.

He stared at Snape. Snape stared back.

Draco was reminded, abruptly, that Snape, tainted or not, was a powerful wizard, the third most powerful in the school after Dumbledore and Harry, and also a Legilimens. Draco wasn’t sure what Snape had learned from looking him in the eye, but he found that he didn’t want to match stares with him any more.

His hands clamped on the book, and the potions recipe. That wrinkled the page, so he smoothed it out again, frantically. Already, he could feel a new, burning ambition stirring within him.

This potion…if this potion really could let me bring back one of my ancestors’ ghosts whose magic was sympathetic to mine, then I could become a Malfoy magical heir. Not Father’s, but still an heir of our family.

And that would open horizons that Draco had known would close to him when he reached the age of seventeen without manifesting his sympathy to his father’s magic and Lucius could deny the obvious no longer. He would be shut out of most formal alliance meetings. He would not be considered as a potential business partner by some of the pickier purebloods, in Europe and elsewhere. He would be unable to achieve some magical training that he might want.

He might be considered an unworthy partner for a powerful witch or wizard.

He looked up at Snape, though he didn’t meet his eyes. “It will take a lot of research,” he whispered.

Snape inclined his head. “Research into your family background, into your own magic, into your ancestors’ magic, to learn who might be most sympathetic to you,” he said. “Research into birth and marriage records, to make sure that the ancestor you choose is pureblooded. Research into the beginning stages of necromancy, that you might summon the ghost to you. I know. The potion took me two years to achieve when I tried it out of simple curiosity as to what would happen.”

Draco blew out his breath. “I’ll achieve it by the end of the school year,” he said. “I promise, Professor Snape.”

“Good,” said Snape, still sounding unmoved. “I should like my book back.”

Draco turned and hurried out of the room, the book clasped to his heart. His brain seemed sharp, clear, whirling up all sorts of ideas about what subjects he would like to look up in the library. His imagination painted clear, new pictures of the future. It was all he could do to keep from laughing aloud.

He had something to do.

*******

Snape watched Draco go, his head on one side. He felt as calm as the mask he had presented to the boy. So was his mind, for that matter. Harry or Dumbledore might look at the surface of his thoughts and see nothing but order, focused on potions research or ways to best train Harry to survive the Death Eaters.

Of course they would. The real agitation in his thoughts lay far below the surface, at a level he had never reached but once.
During the year when he was spying for the Order of the Phoenix under Voldemort, he had lived on this level, where driving determination and absolute clear knowledge of what it would mean to fail had made him unstoppable.

There, he had gone entirely cold.

He could remember his mother’s first lessons if he but closed his eyes. In many ways, his mother had been like Lily Potter, though she had taught him lessons that turned out not to do warping damage to his brain, but to be utter, bitter truth.

*Darkness came before light. The Dark wizards all say that, Severus. But they forget the whole truth. There is one thing older than darkness. The cold came before even the dark did.*

*When you must survive, go cold, not hot. It will keep you alive.*

And he had, and it kept him alive. And now he had again, since he had realized what Harry’s abduction meant and what kind of firestorm Harry was calling, and what Draco’s obsession was and what it meant.

This coldness would save all three of them, and anyone else it was necessary to save, because the proper people were not doing what they should have been doing.

Snape stalked into his office. His thoughts went on turning in the darkness, glittering cold wheels, born of snowflakes and bred of icicles, shining and dancing, dancing.

*Medicamenta Meatus Verus* was indeed a very valuable book, one his mother had acquired in one of her untraceable ways, and Snape had told Draco the truth about its author. Scorned by other Potions Masters, proud, embittered, Melissa Prince had written all her knowledge down and then never attempted to see her book get the kind of attention it deserved.

But she had also worked an enchantment into the book itself, one that she let cost her life, and one that traveled into any new copy of the book that was made, by hand or magically. The book chose the right potion for the person who held it, the right path. And once that person began the necessary research, a binding compulsion would link to their mind and their will, not letting them abandon the project until it was finished. It was Melissa Prince’s one way of insuring that her legacy would live on.

The potion it had chosen for Snape when he first opened it had let him see his soul. Since then, he had lived with no illusions about himself. It had been rather shattering at first, but it was necessary, and it was another thing that had let him survive.

Draco would follow the path of this potion, the one Snape had thought the book would choose for the boy, until he finished it. And he would grow both new powers and his own life. The boy had mentioned an interest in history. Snape thought what he would discover in the history of his own family would be quite, quite interesting.

The fact that he had laid a compulsion on the boy was not something Harry would have done, nor Dumbledore, and possibly not something Draco would have wanted if Snape had asked him about it.

Snape, gone cold, did not care. No one else was seeing what harm Draco’s obsession could do. So Snape would do something about it. No one else would. Besides, the boy was already struggling under the remnants of a compulsion, as Snape had seen when he looked into his mind—one that Harry’s brother had put on him last year. It was sunken deeply into Draco’s mind now, almost part of the fabric of his thoughts, unable to be plucked out without doing considerable damage to his sanity. That compulsion had made him think about his feelings for Harry, constantly, and was probably part of the reason that he was going so mad now. Answering a compulsion with a compulsion, when the second one would ultimately lead to freedom, was something that Snape had no objection to doing.

As for Harry…

Snape’s eyes narrowed. He had watched, from the shadows, as Harry threw *Sectumsempra* at Bellatrix Lestrange. He had not interfered. He did not wish to. His new, cold temper insisted that he keep a watch on the boy to see how he would handle the situation, and he had seen. Then he had spoken with him afterward.

He had panicked before. He had attempted to protect the boy from every danger possible. *That* was not possible.

So he would not panic, not anymore. He would do what was necessary instead: train Harry….

And go on the offensive.
Snape turned. In the corner of his office, three potions simmered, all of them new, and original to him. One was clear in color, one the thick off-white of parchment, one yellow and red and lit by a candle floating on a mimicry of a lily pad on the surface.

Snape narrowed his eyes at them, and felt nothing but quiet satisfaction on the surface, while underneath it—far underneath it—the cold lashed like a scorpion made of ice.

*I am done playing games.*

Harry tried to crane his neck to see what Draco was reading. Without looking up, Draco leaned away from him.

Harry sighed and fidgeted with his toast, not feeling hungry. He hadn’t really felt hungry ever since the beginning of breakfast. Today was their first Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and Harry was still nervous around Moody, his reputation for hating Dark magic, and his silver collar.

Of course, the real source of his tension was Draco.

Draco had spoken little to him in the past week. Oh, sometimes he gave Harry an accusing glare (as he had when Harry finally found the spell combination that rid him of the twins’ ridiculous coloring), and sometimes he entered an animated discussion of class or the mysterious, hush-hush secret that had the professors all talking in odd clumps in the corridors. But mostly, he kept to himself, and read, and just shrugged when Harry attempted to talk to him.

It was putting Harry a bit off his food.

He looked boredly up at the ceiling as the post owls swooped in, and then blinked. An owl was actually making for his table, carrying something for him. He caught it on his outstretched arm, and felt a faint shimmer of a web, gone too swiftly for him to make anything out. He frowned. He would have to investigate the bindings on the owls someday.

He drew out the letter from the twine, and recognized the Headmaster’s writing at once.

*Harry,*

*I would like you to come see me at eight o’clock this evening. It is past time that we discussed what your being vates might mean. My password is “Treacle Tart.”*  

*Albus Dumbledore.*

Harry shot a glance at the high table, not sure the Headmaster was serious, but received a look in return that didn’t twinkle or make false promises. Harry inclined his head, and fed the owl a bit of his toast. It wasn’t doing him any good right now anyway.

Again, his glance went back to Draco. Silly as it was, he felt as though he were missing a limb with Draco so far away, even if it was only in mind.

*Now that’s silly,* Harry thought to himself in derision, and stood to get ready for Defense Against the Dark Arts.

********

Harry raised his eyebrows when he entered the Defense classroom. Every other professor he’d had had already been there, trying to settle in without making it look as though he were settling in, giving the room and the desk dubious glances. Lockhart had already arranged his photographs on the walls that first day, to wink and gleam and grin at the students. Remus had been ready with his illusions. Even Quirrell had at least tried to look mysterious, even though his trembling hands, his stutter, and the ridiculous turban that concealed Voldemort on the back of his head had severely undercut that image.

Moody was nowhere in sight.

“Think he ran away when he heard he had to teach you?” Draco whispered behind him.
Harry, grateful that Draco was speaking to him again even if it was to tease, turned around and raised an eyebrow at him. “Or you, maybe.”

“But you’re more powerful, and you got the Hounds arrested,” Draco pointed out, as he took his seat and got his book out. Harry tried again to catch a glimpse of the cover of the book he was reading, but Draco slid it deftly out of sight. He met Harry’s eyes, and his voice grew sharp. “I think that teaching you would be enough to wear anyone out. Sometimes you’re blind to what’s right in front of your face.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, but didn’t respond. They were hovering on the verge of moving from teasing to true argument, and the best reply he could give—which would involve Moody’s capture of Lucius at one of the scenes of his crimes—would hurt Draco too much. Harry sat down and faced forward.

This time, he noticed the faint shimmer in front of the desk, the mark of a Disillusionment Charm. Harry tensed and called his magic, but waited. It might be a threat, but it might also be a trick.

Just as the first of the students began to relax and complain about their professor’s absence, Moody burst into existence, shedding the Disillusionment Charm and leaning in front of the desk. The girl who’d complained, Susan Bones from Hufflepuff, promptly fainted, sliding down under the chair with a thump. Harry winced and kept one eye on Moody as he checked on her. She seemed to be fine.

“Do you see that?” Moody snarled at them, pacing back and forth in front of the desk with harsh clumps of his wooden leg. “I was in the room all the time, and no one noticed.” For a moment, his magical eye alit on Harry, but it didn’t stay there. It came back to Susan, who was just starting to sit up. “CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” Moody roared, causing the girl to shriek and half-faint again. This time, two of her friends caught her and helped her back into her seat.

Moody turned around fast in front of the desk. Harry could see the gleam of the silver collar around his neck, and the flask at his hip which contained what he said was his “preferred drink.” He came to rest with his wand pointing at Harry.

“I don’t trust him,” Regulus snarled in his head.

Why not? Harry asked, though with the fierce, scarred face staring directly at him and the wand pointing at his face, he could see why not.

He uses too much of his reputation, said Regulus. He’s acting too much like Moody.

Overacting?

No, he’s too good for that. He acts too much like Moody, Regulus repeated.

Regulus, you can’t act too much like yourself.

Yes, you can. You did it when you were still mooning after that impossible brother of yours.

“Mr. Potter,” Moody growled, catching his attention. “Do you think that are proficient in the Dark Arts?”

Harry could feel the attention of the class becoming pinned to him like a butterfly to a corkboard. Zacharias Smith in particular had a scorching stare. Harry remembered, suddenly, that his family was Light. That particular fact had never mattered much before. Now it did.

I’ll have to pay attention to the allegiances of families besides the ones in Slytherin, he thought, and answered Moody.

“Which definition of Dark Arts are you using, sir?”

Moody tapped his wand on his wooden leg. “Stop dodging and answer the question, Potter,” he barked.

“I can’t until I know which definition you’re using,” said Harry. He felt his skin flinching and crawling under the stares. Yes, he’d got a lot of stares the day after Skeeter’s article, too, but those he had expected and could handle. These were unexpected, and decidedly unwelcome.

“You’re dodging like a Death Eater,” said Moody, limping a step closer. “Are you a Death Eater, Potter?”
Harry lifted his left arm, never taking his eyes from Moody, and tilted it so that his robe sleeve slid back, exposing his blank left forearm.

Moody snorted. “All well and good to have no Dark Mark, but how do you prove that you aren’t a Death Eater?”

“You don’t,” said Harry. He was forcibly reminded of his interrogation by Fudge, when the man had refused to recognize basic logic. “You can’t prove a negative. If someone accuses me of being a Death Eater, the proof is up to them.” He leaned forward. “How would you prove that I am, Professor Moody?”

“The use of Dark Arts would answer for itself, I should think.” Moody still stared at him intently, no trace of a smile on his face.

“But lots of people use Dark Arts,” said Harry, and kept his eyes wide and innocent, his voice breathless. He didn’t want to expose this, but, on the other hand, he didn’t want a term of constant harassment by Moody, either—or a whole school year of it. Better to slap him down, now and hard. And look, Snape, I’m not even using any Dark Arts spells to do it! “I know that you used Dark Arts when you wanted to capture Death Eaters, Auror Moody. There are rumors that you used Imperio on a few of them who absolutely refused to cooperate, and the Ministry granted you a special exemption to use it. Yet it’s still Dark Arts, isn’t it?” He blinked at Moody with the guileless expression of a child. “Or does a Ministry exemption change the nature of magic?”

Zacharias Smith chuckled. Moody’s eyes moved briefly to him, then came back to Harry, resting on him with feral intensity.

He hates you, said Regulus.

Can you reach into his mind, then?

No. But I’m reading his expression. He hates you, Harry.

Or he hates the Dark Arts, and hates that a student can walk freely around Hogwarts after practicing them. Harry studied Moody’s face, and his collar. You were the one who told me that Rosier was mad for telling me to distrust Moody, that he would never yield to Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

There was a long, deep pause. Then, even as Regulus sighed, Moody said, “Well done, Potter. Five points to Slytherin.”

Harry blinked. “What, sir?”

Moody nodded at him, then spun around to address the class again. “Constant vigilance!” he shouted. “You have to be prepared for an attack at any time—magical, physical, or verbal. Potter was ready for this attack. The rest of you should be, too.” He took a long step forward. “Smith, if I told you to tell me what was so funny about Mr. Potter’s statement, could you do it?”

Harry let out a long, shaky breath.

I don’t trust him, Regulus growled in his head.

Yes, we’ve established that, Harry thought in exasperation, and sat back to watch Moody rip into the other students. His method of teaching, if that was all it was, was really no more brutal than Snape’s, though Snape’s voice was usually lower when he did it.

If that was all it was.

It was true that a few Hufflepuffs darted nervous glances at Harry when Moody wasn’t looking, but Harry was fairly sure of them. Justin, Ernie, and Hannah were good sorts. Susan knew him less well, but her friends could calm her from thinking the worst of him. Zacharias was—well, not a friend, not really, but logical and skeptical and prone to attacking all things, which would include Moody’s teaching methods, with ferocious energy. Any plan that Moody might have to make them afraid of Harry was not going to work.

And not with anyone else either, hopefully.

I just wonder if he could have something to do with finding Voldemort, said Regulus, abruptly.
Harry blinked. *What?*

*Finding Voldemort,* said Regulus, as if Harry were stupid. *They’re searching the Black Forest for him right now. They don’t have much time. He knows they’re close, but they haven’t found him yet.*

Harry sat up slowly, though, when Moody glanced at him, he pretended the motion was a grab for his book. *Regulus, what are you talking about?*

Regulus abruptly stopped talking. *Um.*

Harry dipped his quill into his inkwell, and waited.

*I, um. I, um, have a connection with the older form of Voldemort, still, since he tortured me for so long, said Regulus. I, um. Have been following it occasionally and trying to find out what he’s doing?*

Harry bit down on his lip, and mastered the temptation to curse out loud. Connor had taught him to master it, last year. *Is that where you’ve been the times that I couldn’t reach you?*

*Um. Some of them?*

Harry hissed.

*You don’t understand! Regulus abruptly wailed. I feel so useless, so helpless, without a body, and you heard Dumbledore last year, the Dark Lord has a lot of trouble recognizing passive links to his mind, so I thought I would follow mine, and exploit it, and so far I haven’t learned much, but—*

*If you would just let me tell Narcissa about the wards and lower them for her, then you could have your body back!*

*I don’t want her to come in here,* said Regulus, and sulked at him.

Harry kept himself from hurling the inkwell across the room, but it was a near thing. *Promise me that you won’t go hunting down your connection to the older Voldemort any more.*

Regulus left.

Harry mostly resisted the temptation to bury his head in his hands and groan aloud because Moody had rounded on him again.

*******

“Treacle Tart,” Harry told the gargoyle outside the Headmaster’s office, and it jumped out of the way. Harry shook his head as he stepped onto the moving staircase. Only a few months ago, he would have felt deeply intimidated and nervous, and would have wanted Snape with him.

That was then, and this was now, when he was mostly impatient and wondered what in the world Dumbledore could possibly want.

The staircase left him outside the Headmaster’s door. Harry composed himself enough to knock, and in the moments it took Dumbledore to answer, reached after Regulus. It was no use. He’d never really been able to sense the actual connection that Regulus used to reach his mind, only whether he was there or not, and he had no way of calling Sirius’s stupid brother back.

*“Come in.”*

Harry pushed the door open and stopped, blinking. Dumbledore’s office had changed in the months since Harry had seen it last. Fawkes’s perch was still in its place, and the Sword of Gryffindor hung on the wall in a glass case, but the shelves were now mostly filled with books instead of odd silver devices. Dumbledore had several locked cabinets along the walls now, but one of them, full of Pensieves, was open. Dumbledore’s desk was loaded with a single huge Pensieve, the silver liquid shimmering near the brim and almost running out of the bowl.

Dumbledore turned around from examining the Pensieve cabinet, his face a mask of calm. *“Ah, my dear boy. Come in.”*
“We were going to discuss what being *vates* means,” said Harry, feeling that he should establish at once what he was there for. He had told Snape where he was going, and received one long, inscrutable look from dark eyes, before Snape had nodded his permission. Then he had turned to tend one of the three potions bubbling in cauldrons at the back of the room, none of which Harry recognized. Snape’s strangeness, like Draco’s, was putting him a bit off his food. “Sir,” he added, when he found that Dumbledore’s gaze was resting on him a bit too heavily.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes. Have you heard of Falco Parkinson, Harry?”

Harry, caught by surprise, blinked for a moment, then said, “Yes. He was Headmaster of Hogwarts at one time, and tried to negotiate with the magical creatures, but was harmed by them for it. He also supposedly tried to be *vates*.”

“He did,” said Dumbledore simply. He covered the Pensieve with one hand, turning it so that Harry could see part of the long title carved on it. *With Falco Parkinson*, it said. “And he was my mentor.”

Harry blinked at Dumbledore. “I thought he lived before your time, sir.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “He lived much longer than is generally supposed. Sit down, please, Harry.”

Harry took a chair in front of the desk, staring with wary fascination at the Pensieve. He wanted to see what was in it, but, on the other hand, Dumbledore had used Pensieves to trick him before.

“He became interested in being *vates* while still a young man, when he felt his power growing in him,” said Dumbledore, tapping the edge of the Pensieve with one finger. It made a ringing sound. “You understand that a *vates* must be a powerful wizard, Harry? And why?”

“Because otherwise he wouldn’t have the power necessary to break the webs,” Harry supplied.

Dumbledore winced. “Ah. Yes. That is something I thought you might have got wrong.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “It’s not something I made up, sir. It’s something that Dobby and Fawkes told me.”

Dumbledore smiled sadly. “I cannot speak for Fawkes. I believe him to be a creature of the highest good, Harry, and I wish that I still had him with me. But as for the house elves…they have been bound for a long, long time, Harry. Do you believe that one of them would be above lying, if he managed to have enough strength of mind to think about it, in order to gain his freedom?”

Harry hated the tiny seed of doubt that sprang up in him. He tried to crush it before it could come to full blossom. “If you think that a powerful wizard has to be *vates* for another reason, sir, then show me what it is.”

Dumbledore nodded and removed his hand from the top of the Pensieve. “We will enter this together, Harry, so that you need fear no tricks from me.”

Harry leaned forward and put his head beneath the surface of the Pensieve, all the time watching as Dumbledore’s beard descended beside him. And then the silver liquid closed over him, and flipped him around twice, and rolled him over, and he found himself standing in a small meadow.

The meadow was at the bottom of a hollow, a spot in the land shaped like two cupped hands. Harry found himself breathing more deeply, as though to take in the scent of the air, though he knew it was only a memory. The air around him sparkled faintly, with a sheen Harry had before seen only in water, and the flowers were a kind he was sure he had never studied, so brilliantly scarlet that the sunlight flinched back from them. More, a faint, subtle song seemed to be coming from the side.

Harry turned, and found a man who must be a younger Albus Dumbledore, from the ridiculous robes he was wearing, descended beside him. And then the silver liquid closed over him, and flipped him around twice, and rolled him over, and he found himself standing in a small meadow.

The meadow was at the bottom of a hollow, a spot in the land shaped like two cupped hands. Harry found himself breathing more deeply, as though to take in the scent of the air, though he knew it was only a memory. The air around him sparkled faintly, with a sheen Harry had before seen only in water, and the flowers were a kind he was sure he had never studied, so brilliantly scarlet that the sunlight flinched back from them. More, a faint, subtle song seemed to be coming from the side.

Harry turned, and found a man who must be a younger Albus Dumbledore, from the ridiculous robes he was wearing, standing next to a far older wizard. He radiated such power that Harry understood at once where the sheen and the scent and the song in the air came from. This was a Light Lord of considerable strength.

Falco Parkinson’s face was mapped with intricate lines, some of them wrinkles that didn’t look natural to Harry. He leaned on a staff of white oak wood, and his robes were twined with glittering silver sigils that Harry thought were letters, though not ones he knew. His eyes were a piercing green, his hair the silver of the sigils, and flowing down to nearly meet the middle of his back. He was speaking, in a melodious voice that added to the song in the air. Harry crept forward to listen to him.

“…that is why being *vates* is so hard, Albus, why so many of us cannot do it. We keep trying to find ways around the
ultimate solution to ease relations between wizards and the magical creatures, but there is no other path.”

“And what is the solution, sir?” Dumbledore’s voice was soft and respectful. Harry blinked. He had known, of course, that Dumbledore had been different when he was younger, but somehow, seeing and hearing it brought it home to him with more force than he had thought existed.

“The sacrifice of magic.” Falco moved an arm, and one of the flowers rose from the ground into the air, turning. Its roots extended to link around the Light Lord’s arm, and it began to sing. Falco gazed at it sadly. “Such power as I use right now, to make this little flower sing and grow elsewhere than the soil, could be used to content the unicorns, to give them a gift that would make the loss of their freedom seem as nothing. But in giving that up, I would sacrifice some of my magic, like cutting off one of my own limbs. That power would never return to me.”

Harry blinked, and felt light-headed. He saw from the younger Dumbledore’s face that he likely felt the same way.

“And that is why so many wizards trying to be vates have failed?” he breathed.

“It is.” Falco Parkinson turned his head and fixed Dumbledore with keen eyes. “They tried to break the webs, and of course, nothing but destruction and chaos results from that. They tried to use compulsion on wizards to make them free the magical creatures, and became Dark Lords. They tried to do anything but give up their own magic. And who can blame them? What wizard would want to do that?” His gaze went back to the flower, his expression sad. “And even then, one wizard’s power is not enough to content every magical creature in the world. How would he choose which ones to content and set in a trance of magic before his ability to go on sacrificing himself ran out?”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “I understand, sir. I would still—like to try. But I will no longer make it my life’s ambition.”

Falco smiled at him. “Good boy.”

The scene abruptly dissolved around Harry, and he pulled his head back from the Pensieve, blinking. He sat hard in his chair, and thought about that. Before him, Dumbledore sat back in his own chair and watched him intently.

Harry looked up. “I’ll still have to talk with the magical creatures about this, sir, and see why their story was so different. But thank you for telling me.” Even though I don’t think it’s the whole truth. “That’s another definition of vates.”

It was. And Harry could already feel the unease that Falco Parkinson had talked about. How would he make decisions like that? Could he choose to free the house elves and unicorns and centaurs, but leave the bindings on creatures like the Runespoors in the Forbidden Forest?

Then, abruptly, he tensed, and felt like slapping a hand against his forehead.

I’m an idiot. I freed the Dementors simply by shredding their web, without sacrificing my magic.

He brought his eyes back to Dumbledore’s face. I don’t think that he’s telling me the whole truth. I’ll have to see.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “Was there anything else that you wanted to tell me?”

“Not for right now, Harry,” Dumbledore nodded towards the door. “I would like you to meet with me throughout the term, so that you might hear more about what it means to be vates. I have other memories to show you.”

I’m sure you do. Harry nodded once, said, “Thank you, sir,” and then turned and departed with a swish of his robes.

******

Albus sat back and gave a little sigh as the door closed behind Harry. They had got through a meeting without threats. That was already a vast improvement over their relationship from last year.

And now he had his distraction in place, the hook baited and set, and Harry had taken it.

Either way, whatever he discovered, he should be distracted enough to stop pursuing wizarding world politics for a time. He would have to speak with magical creatures and discover what being vates truly meant. Or he would have to ponder sacrificing his own magic. Knowing Harry, knowing the way Harry had been raised, Albus was sure that he would ultimately make the decision to give up his own power if it meant freedom for someone else.
And that gave them another valuable advantage. If Harry became magically weaker, fewer wizards would pay any attention to him, and he could do fewer things against the way that things should be done.

Magical power had been the ultimate trump card in wizarding politics for the last several hundred years, at least. Albus knew his appointment as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot had at least as much to do with his strength as with his status as a follower of the Light or the defeater of Grindelwald. Many people had followed Tom not because of his ideals or his Dark magic, but because he was a Dark Lord and they could feel his power.

Harry was a wild card right now, far too dangerous. Reducing his power could only be a good thing.

And if he is the Boy-Who-Lived—not just the one who deflected Tom’s Killing Curse, but the savior we need?

Albus shook his head. The prophecy had been quite clear on that point (if on nothing else). The savior would defeat Tom with a “power the Dark Lord knows not.” Harry had no powers, at the moment, that Tom did not know, and several that he knew rather intimately. Reducing his magical power would do nothing disastrous to the war effort, and probably rather a lot of good, as it would start forcing Harry to think before he acted, and develop his capacity for love instead of power. And the other families, both Dark and Light, would not be so eager to follow him.

Albus knew the answer to Voldemort was love of the wizarding world, not magic. It had to be. It was the way he had defeated Grindelwald.

He turned, once again, to study the latest letters from France and Bulgaria.

He planned to keep Harry distracted with a series of “discoveries” about being vates. But if that did not work…

Well, another distraction should.

*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Fourteen: My Responses Have Claws

Harry considered, later, that he had had no responsibility for the world going mad that particular morning, even though it came about as consequences of his actions. He was not the one who had chosen to go mad at breakfast, for one thing.

He had just asked Draco whether this secret project he was engaged in was like the project last year, when Draco had been studying compulsion to understand how Harry’s magic affected him. Draco had simply given him a harsh look, and said, “Odd as it seems, Harry, not every thought I think comes back to you.”

Harry winced and sat back on the bench. He thought of arguing, of protesting, but the same thing that had kept him silent for the last week and a half choked him now. He trusted Draco, trusted him to be honest about whatever was bothering him. The fact that he was keeping silent now must mean he didn’t want to talk about it. And Harry would only anger him further by pressing.

He forced himself to look away from Draco, and so he saw the white owl enter the Great Hall. It was startling, because Hedwig was the only snowy owl at the school. Harry stared, and then realized this magnificent pale bird was not an owl after all, but a gyrfalcon.

It circled low over the Slytherin table and then coasted down onto the wood in front of him, every feather on its belly and breast ruffled. It stuck out one leg, snapping its head around to glare at Vince, who had started to touch its tail. Vince hastily sat back and raised his hands in defense.

Harry shook his head and removed the letter from the gyrfalcon’s leg. It was a brilliant red, and he wasn’t surprised when the Howler exploded in front of him. He was surprised that he didn’t recognize the voice yelling at him.

“WE THOUGHT THE MINISTRY HAD BETTER CONTROL OF CHILDREN THESE DAYS! WE THOUGHT THAT A POWERFUL WIZARD SUCH AS YOURSELF, HARRY POTTER, WOULD KNOW BETTER THAN TO DESTROY A TREASURE SO OLD AND SACRED!”

Harry blinked. Not only did he not recognize the voice, he had no idea what the hell it was yelling about. That was unusual.
“WE WERE SERVING THE CAUSE OF THE LIGHT IN LENDING OUR ARTIFACTS TO MINISTER FUDGE! YOU HAD NO RIGHT TO DESTROY OUR SPHERE SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU BELIEVED THE MINISTER WAS ABOUT TO DRAIN YOUR MAGIC! DRAINING MAGIC IS WHAT THE SPHERE WAS CREATED FOR! HAVE YOU NO TASTE? NO DISCERNMENT?”

Harry smiled. Now he knew who the Howler was from—the Starrises, the Light wizarding family who had lent the silver sphere that had nearly drained his magic to Fudge. He kept his eyes fixed on the Howler, and caught a glimpse of the seal as the envelope flapped and jumped in agitation. Sure enough, it bore a device that was unfamiliar to him, but looked as though it could be the seal of a Light family named Starrise: a thick half-circle with a rising sun at the bottom of it, its rays reaching out to touch the upper bar of the circle, and five stars scattered among the rays.

The Howler finished, and ripped itself to pieces. Harry shook his head in amusement. The gyrfalcon sat where it was, staring at him. Harry raised a brow. That was a surprise. Most owls delivering Howlers simply flew off again, under the impression that their recipient didn’t want to reply.

“No response,” he told the gyrfalcon.

The great bird hissed, and moved one talon as though it would slash at him. Harry coolly moved his hand out of the way and thought, Ventus.

A blast of wind caught the gyrfalcon and blew it off the table. It managed to right itself in a few wingbeats, then caught the wind and used it to its benefit, screeching in indignation as it rose to the level of the windows.

Harry went back to his breakfast, conscious of the stares and amused by them, too, instead of sickened. He was too busy coming up with the perfect response to Starrise. He nodded when he thought he’d composed it. He would send it out with Hedwig when he had a free period that evening.

“Aren’t you angry?”

Harry blinked and looked at Draco. He’d lowered his book for once and was staring hard at Harry.

“Not really,” said Harry. “I didn’t realize they would be so angry at me, and I certainly didn’t think they’d try to make a public scene out of it, but one has to expect to make enemies in politics.” He cocked his head. “Why?”

“They had no right to do that,” said Draco, his voice cold and still, much the same as Snape’s voice had been lately. Harry nibbled his lip thoughtfully, and wondered if he should venture a comment on the change in Draco’s behavior. He still trusted Draco and Snape to be there if he needed them to be, but he supposed something must have changed. Perhaps it would be worth it, after all, to ask.

“Draco?”

Draco looked at him, most of his mind apparently still occupied with the insult that Starrise had dealt Harry.

“Did I do something wrong?” Harry asked. “Is that why you’ve been spending so much time on Potions research lately, and mostly when we do speak, we argue?”

Draco’s face closed off again, and he jerked the book up in front of his face. “I told you, Harry,” he said. “Not every thought I think comes back to you. And I can be concerned about you, and about Potions research, at the same time. I know you might not think it possible, but it is.”

Harry nodded. “All right.” He did feel a brief stab of hurt, but he found the wound and healed it quickly. Draco just wanted some time alone. And Harry had been selfish in thinking that the reason must have something to do with him. Of course it did not. He should trust in Draco more. Every time before when they had endured something that might have broken their friendship, it had survived, and they had been the stronger for it. He would just wait, patiently, until Draco was ready to speak with him again, and let Draco know that he was here for him if he needed Harry.

He started to stand. They had Defense Against the Dark Arts in a few minutes, and Harry didn’t feel much like remaining in breakfast.

A group of Ravenclaws passed the table, chattering. Harry nodded to Cho, and saw a faint movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned in that direction.
“Caeco!”

Harry reacted instinctively to the Blinding Curse, snapping up Protego in front of him, but replaced it with Haurio a moment later. The Shield Charm would bounce the hex, and Harry didn’t want anyone else getting blinded in his place. He absorbed the magic into the jade-green shield around his hand, and then looked up to see who had hexed him.

Gorgon, a hefty student whom he had trounced a few times last year for bullying Luna, was forcing his way out of the middle of the Ravenclaw group, tears streaking his face.

“You got my uncle arrested, you bastard!” he screamed at Harry, and lifted his wand. “Petrificus Totalus!”

Harry rolled under the table, since the hex had come in so low that he couldn’t move his hand to get in the way. He heard a few short screams, and then someone else pulled a wand and incanted back. Harry grimaced. He didn’t want this to turn into a full-blown fight between Ravenclaws and Slytherins. Gorgon’s grief for his uncle Gamaliel was private, and should remain so.

Someone else shrieked, and someone else incanted back, before he could roll out from under the table. Luckily, Harry had the perfect spell on his lips. He’d learned it the year before he came to Hogwarts, when Lily had warned him that he might someday have to fight single combats with any enemies who weren’t Voldemort (he was Connor’s alone to conquer). A spell that would insure that he and his opponent could fight alone was the perfect thing to learn.

He stood and extended a hand towards Gorgon. “Privilegium!”

The spell erupted from around him, tearing a precise line in the floor that made splinters of stone and dust hover in the air. A tendril of red light grabbed Gorgon and dragged him forward, stumbling. Meanwhile, the spell finished carving the dueling ring and shoved everyone else out of it. Rude, perhaps, but at least this way, no one else could intrude, Harry thought. A curtain of hazy air then snapped up, exactly following the line of the carved ring, shutting them away from the sight of anyone outside it.

Harry bowed his head slightly to the stunned Gorgon and drew his own cypress wand from his pocket. A duel was a duel, an old and private and sacred thing, and he would not use wandless magic in it, even though he had used it to cast the original spell. “Shall we?” he asked.

Gorgon just stared at him.

Harry rolled his eyes, and felt a brief stab of anger and impatience that Gorgon was evidently unwilling to take his grievance this far. Or maybe he just didn’t know what was going on.

“We’re dueling now,” Harry explained. “No one else can interfere. I thought that would be best, as we can keep from hurting anyone.”

Gorgon went on staring. There was fear in his eyes now. Harry frowned and shook his head. 

“Why would he have started this when he didn’t think that he could finish it?”

Oh. Of course. He must have been carried away by the heat of the moment. Well, that happens to everyone.

Harry bowed again. Gorgon, though still seeming dazed, bowed back. Then he stuck his wand forward, as though desperation were giving him courage, and shouted, “Tarantallegra!”

Harry let the hex get through, and danced a brief jig before he whispered, “Finite Incantatem.” That ended the spell, and he eyed Gorgon for a moment. He wanted to end the duel, but not so soon. That would only be a barb to sting Gorgon’s pride, and it might mean that he would just attack Harry again at a later date, perhaps with a spell that could seriously damage him. Prolong it through one round, then. “Rictusempra!”

The magic surged through his wand, familiar and yet moving oddly; Harry realized how strange his wand had become in his grasp. The spell hit Gorgon, and he began to giggle uncontrollably. Harry blinked. He hadn’t expected the Tickling Charm to be one that a sixth-year Ravenclaw couldn’t throw off.

It was, though, and at last Harry realized the duel wouldn’t be able to continue. Stung pride or not, Gorgon was going to lose quickly.
“Finite Incantatem. Expelliarmus,” Harry muttered, resigned, and Gorgon’s wand tore itself from his hand and flew to him. He caught it and examined it for a moment. Oak wood, and probably a phoenix feather core, from the very slight spark he received as he held it. A good wand.

If only the wizard who wielded it were worthy of it.

Harry shook his head and tossed the wand back to Gorgon as the dueling circle and the privacy curtain, triggered by the loss of one combatant’s wand, broke apart. He had thoughts like that more and more often lately, as though his anger for himself in the Minister’s interrogation room had broken some barrier that he didn’t know he had. Harry had tried to reestablish the barrier, but since he didn’t know what it had been made of, patience or forgiveness or training, he wasn’t having much luck.

Gorgon stared at him, horror and fear and anger in his eyes. Harry clenched one fist briefly. What did you think would happen when you attacked me, you idiot? Did you think I wouldn’t defend myself?

He didn’t have time to say anything, and neither did Gorgon, because just then Luna wandered up to Gorgon and stood gazing at him with huge silvery eyes.

“You should have used powdered Snorkack horns on your wand,” she said. “Then you could have aimed it better.” She shook her head slowly. “That’s why you lost.” She glanced at Harry. “And why you won.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. No one is supposed to be able to see through the privacy curtain. “You could see what happened, Luna?”

“There are lots of things to see,” said Luna dreamily, and then turned and wandered back into the group of Ravenclaws. Harry glanced at them nervously, wondering how they would respond to him dueling one of their Housemates.

Cho marched up behind Gorgon and smacked him roundly on the back of the head.

Gorgon rubbed the spot and turned around to stare at her. “Cho!” he wailed.

“I’ve had about enough of this,” said Cho, her eyes narrowed and her face seething with a furious energy. Fascinated, Harry stared. He supposed she simply hadn’t had enough time to be angry during Bellatrix’s attack. “You’ve been chattering nonstop about wanting to have a duel with Potter for the last five days, and then, when you get the chance, instead of asking him to duel with you in a respectful way, you just try to hit him with the Blinding Curse? I thought you looked up that spell because you were genuinely interested in its history, not because you just wanted to use it on Harry!”

She closed her eyes and blew her breath out through her nostrils, then turned to Harry and shook her head slightly. “I’m sorry, Harry,” she said. “I would never have helped him with his research if I knew what he was going to use it for.”

“That’s all right, Cho,” said Harry, still a little stunned that he apparently had a friend in Ravenclaw besides Luna. He had thought that Cho’s assistance extended to giving him the life debt bracelet. “Thank you.”

Cho nodded back to him, and then turned and stalked out of the Great Hall. The other Ravenclaw girls pointedly followed, every one of them making sure to sniff at Gorgon as they passed. A few of the boys lingered and patted him on the shoulder, but they seemed embarrassed at being seen there, and hurried out after the girls as soon as possible.

Gorgon stood there, stock-still, and about that time the rest of the Great Hall appeared to recover and realize what insanity had taken place in front of them. Harry slipped his wand into his sleeve and listened in resignation as the Hall erupted, with shouting from the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, heated arguing as to who was really responsible from the Ravenclaw table, and loud congratulations and cheers from the Slytherin table.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder and tried to smile sheepishly at Professor McGonagall, who was looking at him sternly. “Sorry, Professor,” he said.

She shook her head at him, lips pursed tight. Harry knew she was fond of him, but using magic on a fellow student went beyond what she could tolerate—especially when she knew how much stronger than most of the other students Harry was, and how easily he could have ended this “duel” with one spell.
Harry was now wishing, as McGonagall rounded on Gorgon, that he had done that. It hadn’t been worthwhile to let Gorgon try and keep his pride, not when he was intent on dashing it to pieces anyway.

“And Mr. Gorgon! I am ashamed of you. Why would you try to take vengeance for the sake of an uncle who had a part in abducting a fourteen-year-old wizard? Would you honestly claim that he had done the right thing?”

“He’s a good Auror!” Gorgon howled, apparently stung into anger again. “He was sacked by mistake!”

“And you have made another one in his name,” McGonagall announced, voice tight. “Thirty points from Ravenclaw, Mr. Gorgon, and a week of detentions. With Argus Fileh,” she added, making him flinch.

“And you, Mr. Potter.”

Harry lifted his chin and met her eyes. He saw them soften, and then McGonagall shook her head and sighed in exasperation.

“What you did in setting yourself beyond the reach of anyone else with the Single Combat Spell was foolish and dangerous,” she said quietly. “You or Mr. Gorgon could have been seriously hurt, and no one could have interfered. Thirty points from Slytherin as well, and five days of detention with me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Harry, and ignored Pansy’s long cry of how that wasn’t fair. He should have found a better way of doing this. He should have handled it right the first time. He frowned, and wondered when the moment was that he should have made the decision to do that.

“Do you want a detention as well, Miss Parkinson?” McGonagall asked.

“No, Professor,” said Pansy sulkily.

“Then remember that the danger to both Mr. Gorgon and Mr. Potter was very real,” said McGonagall, and swept away, shaking her head. Harry went back to the Slytherin table and gathered up his books.

“Harry.”

He jumped when an arm abruptly grabbed him around the waist and tugged him backwards. No one had touched him in a few weeks, and he’d got used to no one doing so. He yanked hard and managed to get away before he realized that it was Draco who’d done the tugging. He turned around swiftly.

Draco’s face was stricken. But it shut down even as Harry watched, and he turned, threw his books into his bag, and then left.

Harry narrowed his eyes. That does it. He can’t just be angry at me if he reached out and tried to touch me like that, and he wouldn’t have been hurt that I tried to strike him. I’m getting some answers out of him tonight if I have to use the Single Combat Spell.

********

Harry leaned against the Owlery wall and watched as Hedwig flew out of sight, happily clutching the letter destined for Starrise. She had been huffy the past few weeks, watching Harry get constant post from admirers and detractors, while she did nothing but fly around a bit at breakfast and receive treats from Harry’s plate. The Starrise family evidently lived quite a long way south, but that wouldn’t deter her.

Harry had sent a very polite letter, thanking the Starrises for explaining to him about the broken sphere. He’d asked which artifact they would recommend the next time he wanted to have his magic drained, and apologized for having the bad taste to reject what was obviously the best. He asked to meet with them, so that he might have a guide to magic-draining artifacts.

They wouldn’t be able to find a single impolite word or sentence in it, and no grammatical mistakes, either, but that wouldn’t stop the scent of sarcasm from rising off the page. Harry regretted that he had no mirror and no way to spy into their house, so that he could not see what their expressions would be when they read it. He didn’t even know who would receive it, a couple or an old matriarch or someone else.

He started to turn around, and then paused. Someone was standing near the Owlery entrance. Harry could feel the thrum of magic, pressing against his spine and tingling up and down his skin.
More to the point, he hadn’t sensed the magic before this because it was so familiar to him, and trusted.

He let out a breath and said quietly, “I was coming to seek you out, Draco. Are you ready to speak with me now?”

Draco made a little growling noise, and then stepped further into the Owlery. Harry turned around, not bothering to change his position of leaning against the wall. He folded his arms, thought better of it, and then kept them folded. It might make Draco think he was unapproachable, and, well, Harry was feeling that way. He watched with slitted eyes as Draco edged closer and closer to him. His face was pale, except for two spots high on his cheekbones, and his hands worked in front of him as though he were missing his potions book.

“You nearly died today, Harry,” Draco began.

“No, I didn’t,” said Harry. “Magically, Gorgon is much weaker than I am, and even if he’d got through with the Blinding Curse, it wouldn’t have killed me.”

Draco’s face abruptly flushed all the way. “That’s ridiculous!” he shouted. “How can—how can you just stand there and talk so lightly of your own life? It’s stupid, and I won’t stand for it!”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was working hard to control his temper, really he was, but the words sliced at his lips, begging to be let out.

He breathed slowly, forcing himself to calm down. Bad things happened when he got angry. He flashed back to Umbridge and the black snake, and winced. No, that was not going to happen here. Besides, what Draco said was understandable. He had always been worried for Harry’s life, and Gorgon’s attack today had taken them all by surprise, and then Harry had pulled away from his attempt to comfort him afterward. Of course he would feel this way.

If he does, he should grow up.

Harry sat on the thought. It wasn’t productive.

“All right, Draco, I’m sorry,” he said, holding up a hand. “Yes, I did think pretty lightly of it. But he attacked me out of grief, and I tried to give him what he wanted, by setting up a private duel so that he could exorcise his anger. It didn’t work. Yes, I should have thought of something else, done something else.”

“Why did you pull away from me afterwards?” Draco demanded.

Harry blinked at the change of subject, but answered readily enough. “I was surprised.”

“But I touch you all the time.” Draco’s voice had a low growl to it, and his own arms were folded now. Harry eyed his hands. So long as Draco didn’t go for his wand, this argument was less serious than it could have been. Harry would keep that in mind. “You should be used to it by now.”

Harry had a bad reaction to the words You should. He reminded himself, again, that Draco was irritated with him and had been for the past few weeks. This interaction was typical of their interactions for that time. He had no right to be angry at Draco for something that he understood.

I still want to understand what it was I did to lose his interest in the first place.

Harry shook his head, both in response to what Draco had said and in response to his own irrelevant thought. “I’d lost my being used to it,” he replied, “because you hadn’t done it in a while.”

Draco looked genuinely startled. Harry blinked. Had he missed that he wasn’t touching Harry as much, too?

Then Draco’s face closed in that familiar way that Harry was beginning to hate. “You’ve hurt me, you know,” he said. “The things you kept saying at breakfast today. Why would you assume that my research has anything to do with you?”

That wasn’t what I said. That wasn’t what I meant.

But it was something disturbing to consider, and Harry winced as he thought about it. How much time and attention did Draco lavish on him, and how much did Harry lavish on him in return? The answers were disturbing. Harry had become used to thinking of Draco as close to him, but he himself thought about being vates, his allies, Connor, how he would reconcile
with his father now, what Dumbledore was up to, and even Snape more than he thought about Draco.

Maybe this is the core of what he’s upset about, then. I can offer to spend more time with him, and see if that works.

Harry spread his hands slightly. “I know,” he said. “I’m sorry. Is that it, Draco? Are you upset because I haven’t spent as much time thinking of you as you have thinking of me?” He ran a hand through his hair. “I am sorry for that. I hope I can make it up to you. I do miss you. You are my friend, and I should respect that.”

More disturbing to him than even the fact that he had not spent as much time considering Draco as Draco probably did considering him was the fact that it had taken him so long to notice. Harry would not have gone after Draco if he were sitting with the Gryffindors and tried to make him come back to the Slytherin table. Maybe that was what he should have done? Maybe that was the kind of friend that Draco wanted?

He looked up, to check on the progress of Draco’s feelings, and found Draco’s face still closed, still mulish.

“I told you,” said Draco, and each word fell on the silence like a hammer on glass. “Not everything I think and believe and feel and do has to do with you.”

Harry’s anger consumed him so quickly that he was startled. You came up to the Owlery, you idiot! You accused me of not taking care of my own life! It wasn’t so long ago that you seemed unwilling to share me with anyone else. And now you just expect me to know what’s wrong with you even though you won’t give me a hint?

He half-closed his eyes and choked back the words. He couldn’t say them, not now that he knew beyond a doubt that Draco wanted to be left alone. It would be pressuring, forcing, making it sound as though Harry were demanding that Draco come back and be his friend. And he didn’t have the right to demand that. How much had Draco done for him over the past years? Quite a lot. Therefore, if he wanted privacy and time to think about his potions research, Harry could grant that to him, and would.

“I’m sorry,” Harry repeated. “I just can’t seem to understand that part.” He smiled, but Draco didn’t smile back, and Harry felt the expression wither on his own face. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “I’ll leave you alone for now. If you do want to speak with me later, let me know. I’d like to listen to whatever you have on your mind.”

And he would, he thought, as he worked his way carefully towards the Owlery stairs, not touching Draco and not looking at him. He missed Draco’s contemptuous dismissals of half the thoughts that Harry came up with as not worth his attention, his causal references to Gryffindors as idiots, even the way he sneered at Connor. It was, perhaps, perverse to miss someone for the negative qualities they had, but that seemed to be the case.

Harry had reached the stairs when Draco’s arm abruptly shot out in front of him, barring his way. Harry blinked and turned his head.

“Draco,” he said, when he thought he could control his voice and not simply scream, “I thought I knew what was wrong. Now I don’t think I do, and you won’t tell me.”

“Draco,” he said, when he thought he could control his voice and not simply scream, “I thought I knew what was wrong. Now I don’t think I do, and you won’t tell me.”

“You should.” Draco folded his arms again. “If you were really my friend, you’d know.”

Harry snapped his head around. He knew his eyes were blazing. He saw Draco’s eyes go wide as he stared at him. He didn’t
“Fuck you, Draco,” he said. “I thought you would know one thing about me if you know anything at all. I hate head games. I hate being manipulated. That’s the one thing you’ve never done with me. Oh, sure, you’ve manipulated life debts and Slytherin rules, but you’ve never tried to reach into my mind and scramble my thoughts. And I’d appreciate if you refrained from doing it now.”

Draco blinked, slowly. Then he said, “I told you, Harry. It doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“I don’t fucking believe you,” said Harry, and then turned and stormed down the stairs. He had a detention with McGonagall, and so couldn’t go flying out on the Pitch, but he hoped that she might have something intense for him to work on, such as a really stubborn spot on the floor. That was the only way he was going to calm his magic down.

The guilt was growing even as he descended, of course. You could have handled that better. You could simply have walked out. You shouldn’t have got angry.

Harry closed his eyes. He was calm, after all, by the time he reached McGonagall’s office. The guilt had eaten the anger.

********

Draco leaned on the wall of the Owlery, and stared at the face that Harry had carved, and shivered. Sometimes he forgot how strong Harry was, until he actually saw the magic work. The dueling spell today hadn’t been impressive enough, since it had concealed everything that happened in the circle, and the sensation of power and the scent of roses were surprisingly easy to get used to.

But that didn’t mean he was less angry at Harry.

Why can’t he understand that this is important to me, and support me and be interested in it? Why can’t he just be a friend to me, for once, instead of my always having to be a friend to him? And why did he keep pressing me to tell, when I didn’t want to? He doesn’t have the right to order me around. No one has the right to order me if I don’t want to take the orders. And I thought that was what he was so frightened of, giving orders to someone else?

Apparently not.

Draco exhaled as hard as he could, and straightened. He had some more research to do on Malfoy ancestors in the thirteenth century. He should get back to that. The burning ambition was stirring in his chest even now, tugging him on.

And someday, when I’m at the end of this path, Harry will have to see me for what I am—just as powerful and just as worthy as he is.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

Interlude: From Melinda and Hellebore

The Daily Prophet

September 16th, 1994

MINISTER CALLS FOR SOLUTION TO HARRY POTTER SITUATION

Calls Potter’s Current Situation ‘Disgraceful’
By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, in an unexpected response to the allegations of abduction and mistreatment made by Harry Potter two weeks ago, has responded with a plea for a change in Potter’s living situation.

Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, in an unexpected response to the allegations of abduction and mistreatment made by Harry Potter two weeks ago, has responded with a plea for a change in Potter’s living situation.

Potter, 14, was interviewed by this very paper, and in that interview, his unusual home situation was emphasized. He is currently under the guardianship of Professor Severus Snape, of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, despite having two living parents. Of these parents, one, Lily Evans Potter, has been stripped of her magic under mysterious circumstances and is no longer considered a fit guardian for a young wizard, particularly one as magically powerful as Potter.
Potter’s father, however, is James Potter, once a famed Auror, responsible for the capture of the Death Eaters Rodolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange. Before he retired to live with his young family in a special isolated home, out of fear of Death Eaters targeting the infant Boy-Who-Lived in vengeance for You-Know-Who’s fall, he also accomplished many other acclaimed deeds. He is currently in residence at Lux Aeterna, the Potters’ home for the last several generations.

Minister Fudge noted this and several other facts about Harry Potter’s home situation in a special press conference given yesterday, and attended by select members of the press.

“Harry Potter is a child,” he declared, to the accompaniment of several charts that traced the evolution of laws meant to protect young wizarding children from unfit guardians and parents. “That he reacted as he did to what was actually a very innocuous Ministry procedure is understandable. However, it is my duty as Minister not to allow this misperception of Mr. Potter’s to continue.

“Mr. Potter has been under the guardianship of Professor Severus Snape for nearly a year, due to an unfortunate mistake made by members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and some lost paperwork. At one point soon after the fall of You-Know-Who, Severus Snape was tried as a Death Eater. He was cleared on the word of Albus Dumbledore. But it seems that we may have been wrong about him after all. It seems that he may have been poisoning the boy’s mind against the Light.”

Minister Fudge expressed his horror and surprise at the discovery, and his dismay that the odd situation had been allowed to continue for as long as it has.

“Of course, now I completely understand and forgive Mr. Potter’s accusations,” the Minister explained. “He has come young to his power, and he has been receiving inappropriate guidance from a Dark wizard. He needs to be in a loving home, with parents who can raise him in a good understanding of the Light.”

The Minister is confident that such a home can soon be found.

“After all,” he said, as he closed the press conference, “his twin brother is living proof that a young wizard can be very powerful, even powerful enough to defeat You-Know-Who, and yet able to believe and walk in Light. I humbly admit the Ministry’s part in not making sure that young Harry got the same kind of treatment sooner. It’s disgraceful. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my apologies to Mr. Potter, and my sincere wishes that he finds a new home soon, with all possible happiness involved.”

******

Hellebore Shiverwood
Ministry of Magic
Department of Magical Family and Child Services

September 16th, 1994

Dear Mr. Potter:

Greetings from the Ministry of Magic! We cordially extend an invitation for you to attend a private meeting, to be held in our offices in the Ministry on the autumnal equinox. This is the ancient day of balance, the day of readdressing grievances and righting wrongs, and we would now like to address a very great wrong. On this day, custody of you will be transferred back to your blood father, James Potter, who has completed all appropriate forms.

Please bring your current guardian, Professor Severus Snape, with you. With any luck, this will be a quick and efficient process that will return you to the best living situation for you as soon as possible.

Have a wonderful day, and a very happy late summer to you!

Hellebore Shiverwood.

~*_~*_~*_~*_~*

Chapter Fifteen: He Will Have Cause to Regret

Snape gently dipped the tip of his quill into the off-white potion. In a moment, the liquid had clung to it, and he was ready to
write his letter to James Potter. He nodded, and sat down to compose.

Potter:

I suppose you imagine that you can best me this way, that you will take Harry away from me in a legal battle. I would ask you to look beyond your own reflexive hatreds and childish grudges, but I suspect that would be like asking a Muggle to fly a broom. Therefore, I will come to this private meeting with you, since that will perhaps confront you with the results of your childishness in a way impossible for you to ignore.

Professor Severus Snape.

Snape finished writing and examined the tip of his quill. Yes, the ink had dried, and with it, the potion. He ran a finger down the side of the parchment and gave something that he knew was not a smile. Then he drew out a small brush waiting and ready in his pocket, dipped it into the potion, and used it to paint the sides of the parchment, watching patiently as it dried in turn. No matter where he picked up Snape’s letter, Potter would absorb some of the potion through his fingers.

Then Snape turned and eyed the two other potions. The clear one was not yet ready, and would not be for some time. The potion with the candle floating on it glimmered and bubbled. Snape eyed it and nodded. Yes, it would take a few more days, but he had a few more days. The meeting with Potter and Fudge was not until the autumnal equinox, after all.

He folded his letter to Potter, slid it into an envelope, and then made for the Owlery, that he might find a bird to deliver it to Lux Aeterna. Meanwhile, his emotions exulted far beneath the surface, cold and stinging.

Potter was foolish to do this, and still more foolish to send a letter about the meeting to me before it was time. He will have cause to regret his actions.

He will have cause to regret so many things.

*****

Harry clenched his hands in front of him and fought to control his temper. He had already had to leave breakfast because he was getting close to destroying half the dishes on the Slytherin table with his rage. At this rate, he would be late to Transfigurations before he had calmed down, but he didn’t particularly care at the moment. He was so angry at his father that it was hard to breathe.

How could he do this to me?

 Knowing that it was only, as James thought, in his best interests for once did nothing to improve Harry’s general disposition or incline him towards leniency. His father knew that Harry didn’t want this kind of legal challenge. He knew that Harry had wanted Snape to remain his guardian even when he was staying at Lux Aeterna. Why now? What had happened to make him change his mind?

Harry blinked and looked up as someone passed his hiding place, a small alcove on the second floor. It was Snape, walking back towards the dungeons. Harry could not be sure, but he thought his mentor’s face was more relaxed than it had been of late, with a small sneer touching the corners of his mouth. Perhaps he had just assigned someone detention, Harry thought. In that case, Harry hated to interrupt his good mood with the letter about the meeting, but Snape was invited, too, and Harry had to make sure he went. He didn’t trust himself to be alone in a room with James and only one other person, perhaps Madam Shiverwood.

“Sir,” he called, stepping out into the hallway.

Snape halted and turned to face him, and the sneer vanished. Harry was left facing the same calm, cold, professorial face he’d confronted for a few weeks now. It was Snape, walking back towards the dungeons. Harry could not be sure, but he thought his mentor’s face was more relaxed than it had been of late, with a small sneer touching the corners of his mouth. Perhaps he had just assigned someone detention, Harry thought. In that case, Harry hated to interrupt his good mood with the letter about the meeting, but Snape was invited, too, and Harry had to make sure he went. He didn’t trust himself to be alone in a room with James and only one other person, perhaps Madam Shiverwood.

“What is it, Harry?”

At least he’s still calling me by my first name, even if it sounds strained. Harry decided that he would go ahead. “This letter, sir,” he said, brandishing it. “The Department of Magical Family and Child Services says that they’re revoking your guardianship over me and transferring it to—“
“Potter,” said Snape, and an old, faint, habitual sneer colored the words. “Yes, I know. Your father sent me a letter gloating about it.”

Harry winced. “Did he? I’m sorry, sir. But what are we going to do about it? I don’t think the Ministry will listen if I just tell them that I want to be left with you.”

“I have taken care of it. Do not worry.”

Harry paused. “I—don’t take this the wrong way, sir, but how?” He could just imagine some of the things that Snape would do to his father if he had the chance. Compulsion was probably the least of them.

“I do not wish to tell you,” said Snape. “You will know it when you see it. Suffice it to say, Harry, that you are well-protected, even if you do not realize it.” He turned and started to walk towards his office again.

“Sir! Wait, sir.”

Snape gave him a glance of faint impatience. “What is it? I promise you, Harry, this has been taken care of. It will provide nothing more than a faint bit of embarrassment on our equinox morning.”

Harry groped for and found the words he had been missing. “I wasn’t going to ask about that, sir. I meant—why have you gone cold lately?” Not the best phrasing, perhaps, but it was what Harry thought of. Snape reminded him of himself when the cold fury gripped him at the end of second year. He could not think why Snape would be indulging in it without a good reason, since Snape had always said that such icy rage was dangerous. “You’re different, and I don’t understand why.”

Snape inclined his head. “It is an effect of the danger you have been in,” he said, voice distant. “I realized that I was doing less than no good when I panicked and came too late to save you each time. That is why I wish to teach you to protect yourself, and to make sure that you are safe and guarded when a danger does threaten. The coldness is nothing more than an attempt to think rationally about the situation, instead of raging about each and every enemy.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He could think of nothing to say to that. He drew in his breath and forged ahead. “And do you know what’s wrong with Draco? He still talks to me sometimes, but most of the time he ignores me, and we had an enormous fight in the Owlery yesterday.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. “I suggest you ask young Mr. Malfoy that.”

“I did,” said Harry. “He said that he didn’t want to tell me.”

Snape shrugged. “Then I suggest you leave it alone,” he said. “Sometimes, Harry, people do need time apart from each other, and the way that you and Mr. Malfoy interact has been causing me anxiety for some time. Your friendship has been not so much a friendship as an obsession on his part and a desire to protect him on your part. Perhaps this is what you need, a small series of fights and distancings that will enable both of you to become better friends to each other.”

Harry blinked and swallowed. He hadn’t even considered that. He had known that he and Draco were not equal in what they gave to and received from each other since yesterday, but he had been so acutely unhappy that he had never even guessed that this separation could be a good thing, or that Snape would approve.

“Oh,” he said again, and then nodded to Snape. “Thank you for letting me know that, sir.”

He turned and walked off, quickly, speeding up when he was sure that he was out of Snape’s sight. He knew he would miss Transfigurations now, but he made his way to the Slytherin common room anyway, which would be empty of everyone. It was one missed class, and he would take any extra detentions that McGonagall assigned him. The one yesterday, alphabetizing Transfiguration books by title, hadn’t been bad.

He needed, very badly, some time alone to think.

*******

Snape watched Harry go with narrowed eyes.

_The boy is bothered. I did not realize that even a temporary loss of Draco would hit him so hard._
Then Snape shook his head.

*This is the only way. Draco needs a distraction, and more, he needs an interest outside of Harry, something that could lead to him having true friends and a true, driving passion that does not revolve around his crush. No one else will step in. There is no other way so guaranteed to work.*

*And Harry would not speak to me again if he knew that I had used compulsion. I cannot tell him the truth.*

Snape began the journey to the dungeons again when he was sure that he would not run into Harry. This might be painful for the boy right now, but in the end, he would be the stronger for it. Harry had said again and again that he did not want friends whose lives revolved around him through compulsion. That Draco’s state had not been the result of Harry’s magic made no difference. It was *like* compulsion, and it was damaging and destroying Draco’s freedom, something Snape did not want to see happen to any member of Slytherin House.

He sank the concerns to the cold level of his mind, and smirked. He had a class of third-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs to terrorize.

********

Harry whispered, “*Ventus dirus,*” to the stone wall, and it slid aside and admitted him to the Slytherin common room. As Harry had known it would be, it was empty. Harry hesitated, and thought about flopping down and having his think on the couch in front of the fire.

Then he shook his head and made for the fourth-year boys’ room. He didn’t want anyone coming in because of a forgotten book or homework and interrupting him, even if it was only for a few minutes. Above all, he didn’t want to have to answer awkward questions right now.

He opened the door to his room, and gave a brief, satisfied nod. The room was cool and dark. Harry made his way to his bed, climbed in, and drew the curtains shut after him. Then he lay back and stared at the ceiling of the four-poster.

He hadn’t been *thinking.* It was time to *think,* not just react.

Harry folded his hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and asked himself the first question: When had Snape and Draco begun acting strange?

He knew the answer, as long as he was counting Draco’s strange behavior from his trying to wrestle Harry away from the Gryffindor table that first day of school and not just from the day he’d started reading the old Potions book. Draco had been furiously protective of him the day before, too, even though all he and Harry had done before the attack by Bellatrix Lestrange was play Exploding Snap together, fend off the post owls delivering letters to Harry, and talk about the upcoming year. And Snape had gone cold and strange the very same day, with his lecture to Harry about Bellatrix and *Sectumsempra.*

So, now, the second question: *Why* did they begin acting strange? What could Harry have done to send them into those states? How had he acted differently?

And that one, too, was easy to answer, once he thought about it.

*I took them for utter granted in the meeting in Scrimgeour’s office. I could have told them the truth privately before I revealed it to my allies, but I didn’t. They deserved to hear it in private. They’ve done more for me than anybody else. And I barely even looked at them during the meeting, as though I expected them just to nod and accept whatever I said.*

*What other unconscious arrogance have I been manifesting? I’ve been acting this way, with regard to Draco, for years. I see that now. But I think I finally passed the boundary of what they were willing to tolerate. Taking them for granted finally angered them. And, as Snape pointed out, constantly putting myself in danger only heightened the feeling that I took them for granted. I didn’t trust them enough to bring them along when I confronted my enemies.*

Harry felt his breath speed up. The idea that he might have lost his best friend and his guardian forever, through his own actions, was making tears prickle at the corners of his eyes. And the idea of *that* combined with the other things he had to accomplish—the *vates* duties, facing his father down and somehow maintaining Snape’s legal guardianship of him, this political duel with the Minister, instructing Connor in leadership, learning offensive and Dark magic, negotiating with his allies—was enough to send a tight spring of panic coiling in the center of his chest. How was he ever going to do it all? How was he going to hold up without collapsing under the weight?
You can do this. You know you can. And now that you know the problem with Draco and Snape, you know how to solve it.

Harry gave a shallow nod, for all that no one else was there to see it. He had been acting out of emotions recently: arrogance, hurt, blind anger. He knew how to see past them. He had seen past them for years, when he knew that his brother’s life hung on his actions. Just because he had a different set of lives to save now, more happiness to make himself responsible for preserving and protecting, did not mean that he was going to collapse.

You can do this. You can repair the results of your own mistakes. You know the determination that kept you going, when you might have given up on learning the spells that you needed to protect Connor? Summon it back. You’ve shamefully neglected it during the last little while. But you can stand up under the weights hanging on your shoulders. None of them is an imposition. They’re all mistakes that you made without realizing you were making them, or duties and entanglements that you chose. That ought to make you more eager to tackle them, not less.

Harry could feel his breathing ease. The tears receded from the corners of his eyes. He stared at the ceiling of his bed again and knew his face was calm.

Carefully, he gathered up all the swimming emotions that were plaguing him and making his reactions blunt and clumsy and of the kind that hurt other people, and tucked them under the surface of the quicksilver pools that Snape had taught him to use in Occlumency. This was not the same thing as the box that had caused him so much trouble in second year, and which Harry was never going to use again. These containers were fluid. They would hold the emotions without making him unaware of them; he could summon them back if he wanted them. What they did do was give him patience and clear his mind for the kind of understanding that everyone around him needed from him so desperately.

His magic stirred, and for once, it was magic without the spikes and claws it had grown in the last week. This magic was simply eager to do what he wanted it to do, to have exercise. Harry exhaled the last of his fear and doubt and anger, and then tried out a smile. It felt more natural on his face than it had in a long time.

I have to be conscious of what I’m doing. I always knew that, with regard to being vates, but I should have known it would also apply to the relationships I have with other people. Harry shook his head, but the regret was fading into self-deprecating amusement. I have caused harm, but none of it is irreversible, not if I start watching my steps right the fuck now.

And I will. I have to. I have all this power. That means that I must know what I do with it, since no one else is going to hold my shoulder and guide me through the motions. I can make people’s lives better, or I can mess them up without even realizing it. I want to do the first. To defend and protect and serve, Narcissa wrote me once. That’s what the not-a-lord kind of powerful wizard does.

That’s what I want to do. I forgot about that for way, way too long. I’m rededicating myself to that as of now.

I know what Snape wants from me: to study offensive spells, and leave him alone to brood in peace, to stop asking for so much and just to trust him. Well, I can give him that. As long as I handle my Occlumency right, then I can even be cheerful about it.

Draco wanted my unconditional support when he wanted it and to leave him alone the rest of the time. Granted! That’s where my magic comes in useful. I still won’t use Legilimency on him unless he asks me to, but I can easily enough tell what he’s feeling towards me. There’s a spell in the book Hawthorn gave me on that. When he’s angry and wants to be left alone, I’ll know, and when he wants me there to ask questions or give him respectful silence or whatever else it is, then I can know and go to his side. There. It’s easy. I’m glad.

And that left the situation with James.

Harry sighed. I can’t do anything to make the situation worse. Snape told me that he’d handled it, and I should trust him. He’s right. Writing a letter to James or yelling at him would only make him angrier, and maybe the meeting would be moved up and whatever plan Snape has wouldn’t work. I’ll just write a polite letter to Father telling him that I don’t approve of what he did. He has his reasons, after all. I’d like to know what they are.

Harry lay still for a moment more, checking his new list of resolutions. It seemed solid enough. It made his life so much simpler, and it would give the people around him what they wanted.

Harry was rather surprised it hadn’t occurred to him to do this before. After all, there was much evil in what his mother had taught him, but there was much good as well. Harry knew, now, that he didn’t have to dedicate his life to his brother or wear
the phoenix web that would compel him into feeling love and loyalty for his family. That meant he was free to choose where to place his love and loyalty, and what to do with his magic.

And I choose to do these things. I’ve wanted to be vates anyway, once I understood what the magical creatures needed from me. This is just understanding more about what other people need from me.

Time to grow up, Harry.

*******

Draco gave a small growl and slammed the book shut. This was making no sense. I thought books weren’t like people, he thought, as he leaned back, put his arms across his chest, and scowled at the book he’d just closed as well as the other tomes lying on the table and couldn’t lie.

But what he had found made no sense at all. He’d been researching Julia Malfoy, the ancestor of his who had slept with her own brother to produce an heir to the Malfoy line. He’d admired her strength and determination, and from the letter that his mother had written him about her, Draco had been sure that she must have the compulsion gift. That sounded like a good choice for an ancestor sympathetic to him. After all, Draco had inherited the Black blood, and some Blacks had been compellers.

But there was no mention of Julia Malfoy in the huge Collegium List of Registered Compellers 1299-1504, and there should have been. The Collegium, the predecessor of the Ministry in record-keeping, hadn’t bothered with this nonsense of asking people to come in and register their magical gifts of their own free will. Instead, they had simply recorded anyone born with a certain kind of magic, much the same way that Hogwarts recorded the birth of magical children to be sent letters on their eleventh birthdays. It wouldn’t have mattered whether Julia Malfoy told anyone about her gift or not. She should still be listed there.

And she wasn’t.

Did that mean that she didn’t really have the compulsion gift? Draco shifted his glare to the book that lay beside the Collegium one. But that means that this history is wrong to insist that she did. And the descriptions it gives of how she smiled at people and made them do what she wanted certainly makes it sound as if she could compel them.

Draco rubbed his face wearily. He’d been in the library, researching and neglecting his Charms essay. He didn’t want to leave, though. He wanted to solve this mystery, and be able to make the potion right now. Julia Malfoy was the best candidate he had found so far, and he didn’t want to abandon her now.

I wish Harry were here.

A few minutes later, as he was still sitting there and trying to work out the best way to continue his research, footsteps sounded behind him, and a soft voice said, “Draco?”

Draco turned and blinked. Harry hovered at the end of the aisle of shelves, as though he would turn and retreat in a moment if Draco didn’t want him there.

Draco motioned for him to come closer.

Harry took a seat on the opposite side of the table. He didn’t ask, irritatingly, for answers to questions that Draco didn’t want to give and which he should already know anyway. He didn’t try to connect the present situation with any one in the past. He simply sat and waited, in a calm, listening silence, into which Draco could choose to pour words or not.

Draco poured words into it.

“Look at this,” he snapped, pushing the Malfoy history book towards Harry. Harry obediently picked it up and let it flop open at the beginning of the section on Julia Malfoy, which Draco had thumbed through so often in the past day that he’d weakened the book’s binding. “She could compel people. I know she could. Just read the descriptions. But she should be in here.” He touched the Collegium book. “And she’s not. I don’t understand.”

Harry was quiet, reading the book for a long moment. Then he looked up, blinking. “Perhaps it’s a different kind of compulsion?” he asked, his voice soft and meek.
Draco blinked in turn. “What do you mean?”

Harry turned the history book towards him and touched a particular passage. Draco bent over and read it. He’d skimmed through it a few times, since it seemed to have no particular relevance to what he was doing.

*Observers often reported a dazzling aura around Lady Julia, as though she were about to burst into light like a phoenix any moment. She would smile gently when questioned about it and murmur that she had no great power, only the grace that was her due for being born a Malfoy. And, indeed, despite the many reports that spread after her death, while alive, no one ever saw her perform any feat of dazzling magical prowess.*

Draco looked up and shook his head. “I don’t see what you mean.”

“She was hiding, I think,” said Harry. “She could make other people think that she wasn’t a powerful witch just by saying that she wasn’t. But she couldn’t hide her aura.” He hesitated, and then the thick scent of roses filled the room.

Draco felt his eyes widen as the suspicion caught up with him. “She was powerful enough to be a Light Lady or a Dark Lady,” he whispered. “Her magic could drug the people around her and get them following her inclinations. But it’s not the same as her actually having to reach into people’s minds and drive home her desires. That would explain both the incidents that look like compulsion and the fact that no one ever reported her formally as a compeller who somehow managed to escape the Collegium’s list. She was just using a side-effect of her magic.”

Harry nodded and smiled.

Draco whistled under his breath, thinking of what he might become if he could summon Julia’s ghost and gather in her magic. First, of course, he had to make sure that her magic hadn’t passed to her son, or any of the other dozen-odd children in the Malfoy line to whom she had been a surrogate mother. He thought it unlikely, however. He’d already studied the Malfoy generation after her, in cursory detail, and none of them were powerful enough to be a Lord or Lady.

And if her magic remained free, uncontained in any body, like the magic that came and haunted the dancers on Walpurgis Night, then Draco could draw it towards him. And if he were sympathetic enough to her—if his soul and hers sang the same song—then he could absorb the power and become, perhaps, a Lord, able to compel people without it being formal compulsion, himself.

He would have to make sure he and Julia were sympathetic before anything else. But Draco had the quiet, determined feeling that they would be.

He looked up and met Harry’s eyes, flashing him a small smile. “Thanks.” _He’s really not so irritating when he helps me and doesn’t talk as though everything I do had a connection to him._

Harry smiled back at him, a smile that Draco found he had missed. “Of course.” He hesitated a long moment, then said, “I understand that you just want some time to yourself, Draco. I’ll help you however I can, and won’t ask any questions that you don’t want to answer. I understand that you need your own life.” He met his eyes firmly. “It’s nothing more than you’ve given me for years.”

Draco blinked, stunned. _Now, if only he had understood that yesterday, this whole fight could have been avoided._

“Thank you, Harry,” he said. “It won’t be all the time. I think we do need some separate time. I can’t spend every moment running around after you.” _Especially when you were ignoring me anyway,_ his temper added, but Draco ignored it in turn. Harry was trying to make a compromise, and wasn’t doing anything like talking to the Chang bitch right in front of Draco. It was almost as though he had figured out that Draco loved him and was giving him the silent support that any lover had a right to demand.

Harry nodded. “I know. Sorry for that, Draco.” He rose smoothly to his feet. “I’ll see you when I see you.”

Draco smiled and watched him out of the library. Then he shook his head and snatched up the Malfoy history book again, this time to look for clues that he and Julia were in sympathy-song, all the while humming under his breath. His life went so much more smoothly when people just agreed with and understood him.

******

“Come in, Harry, come in.”
Albus watched approvingly as Harry came in and shut the door behind him, taking a seat in the chair opposite his desk without waiting to be asked. Harry even met his eyes fearlessly, and only smiled at the small touch of Legilimency Albus used. Albus found calm, clear patience and determination in the forefront of his mind, and thick shields piled on shields behind them, showing the unmistakable quicksilver touch of Severus’s teaching.

He could read none of Harry’s emotions, but he could tell that Harry wasn’t letting them interfere with his thinking. Something had obviously changed Harry’s habit of reacting without consideration of the consequences lately, and that was wonderful. They could not have an overly emotional, impulsive fourteen-year-old Lord flinging his magic anywhere he liked.

“Have you considered what I told you last time, about sacrificing bits of your magic to help the magical creatures?” Albus asked him.

Harry leaned back in his chair and adopted a thoughtful frown. “I don’t think it would work, sir. They would still be in prisons if I did that, not truly free. It would just be making them ignore their prisons.” He met Albus’s eyes. “With respect, sir, I don’t think I can do it that way.”

“What would you do, then?” Albus concealed his sharp stab of disappointment. And things were going so well. Well, at least he has been ignoring politics. There was no snappy letter to James, and that Skeeter woman has not done a second article about Fudge yet.

“I would make a thorough study of the webs, see what shattering them would cost people, and then try to alleviate the consequences,” said Harry. “There is one magical artifact in Lux Aeterna which might help. It forces the person who enters it to be absolutely honest with himself. If I walked through it, and asked it questions about the webs, then it would help me see any consequences I was ignoring.” He frowned. “But walking it took my father months. I’m not sure that I can afford the time. I think I’ll ask Fawkes first. He can tell me many wise things, I’m certain, being a phoenix.”

Albus lifted his eyebrows, impressed in spite of himself. The boy sounded wise, as though he had actually thought about this instead of just declaring that he would unleash chaos. And he was talking about absolute honesty, which, like free will and domestication, had always been a trait of the Light. He might turn out a Light Lord after all.

Better than all that, the slow pace at which Harry evidently intended to move would give Albus time to weave more plans which might contain him.

“I have nothing to say except that I approve of your plan entirely, Harry,” Albus said. “Please let me know if there is anything else that I can tell you about being... vates. I am anxious to see our world continue in Light.”

Harry smiled at him as he stood. “Thank you, sir.”

Albus watched him go. Have I been wrong? Is he the best chance for the wizarding world after all, and I have simply been ignoring it?

********

This is stupid.

Harry nearly leaped off the moving staircase in surprise. He hadn’t heard from Regulus at all in the past several days, and guessed that he had been upset over Harry’s demand that he stop seeking out Voldemort.

Harry winced a little. I have no right to forbid him from that. Yes, it’s dangerous, but all I can do is explain the danger and hope that he listens. I don’t have any right to control him, and I couldn’t, anyway.

“Where have you been?” he whispered aloud, as he stepped off the bottom step and out past the gargoyle. “Are you all right? Is the connection to Voldemort still working?”

All’s quiet for now. I can’t read most of his thoughts. Regulus’s voice became brisk. But that’s not what I came to talk to you about. This is stupid, Harry, what you’re doing. It’s an exact variation of what you were doing to yourself before.

I don’t know what you mean, said Harry in confusion, as he headed towards the dungeons. Connor had asked him for lessons in leadership in a few days, and Harry wanted to make a list of what things he considered it most important for his brother to learn. I’m trying very hard not to make any of the mistakes that I made in the past, while still aware that I’ll make some. I’m
giving people what they want. I’m not tamping all my emotions down; I still crack open the pools and let them out sometimes. The same with my magic. I’m trying to make up for ignoring Draco and Snape.

Regulus retreated into wordless grumbling. Harry smiled. He thought it sounded like a good argument himself.

He felt a brief stir of anxiety, since tomorrow was the autumnal equinox and the day he would see James, but the anxiety faded as he remembered Snape’s plan. He had to trust in Snape. If he said he had a plan that would take care of it, then he would take care of it. Harry’s instinct was still to cry and rage, but his instincts had got him in enough trouble in the past few weeks.

His mind hummed smoothly as he considered what he would do tomorrow, laying all the plans neatly in place. The meeting with James would not take most of the day, he hoped. He had so many other things to do.

He was busy, and he was happy, far happier than he had ever been while he was trying to be Connor’s protector and failing at it.

I don’t like failing. I was failing all over the place in the last little while. I’ll undoubtedly fail in the future. But this time, at least, I can see it coming and hopefully head it off, or recover from it quickly.

There are people who need so much. It’s horrible that the magical creatures have been bound in webs for so long, and that Snape and Draco felt they had to retreat from me to have any semblance of a normal life. I was leaning on them, and I didn’t realize it. Well, they can lean on me for once, if they need to, and stand apart from me, if they need to. I want to show them that they’re absolutely as important as everyone else in my thinking, and deserve the same consideration.

I just want them to be happy.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixteen: On This Day of Balance

“James, I wish you wouldn’t do this.”

James kept his back turned to Remus as he picked up a handful of Floo powder. “I know, Remus,” he said quietly. “You’ve told me several times now that you wish I wouldn’t do this, that you think it’s the wrong thing to do, that it’s only going to make Harry hate me.” He paused and glanced over his shoulder at the oldest friend left to him now—unless one counted Peter, and James still didn’t feel he could. Probably even less than before, after today. “But you don’t understand. Harry can hate me. But at least he’ll be alive. I’m going to take him out of Hogwarts and tutor him in Lux Aeterna for the year. Then at least Death Eaters can’t attack him the way they always seem to at Hogwarts.”

“And Severus?” Remus’s hands were clenched at his sides, his amber eyes alive with the wolf. It made James remember the day Remus had tried to take Harry away from the house in Godric’s Hollow, and James had come after him with silver. He bit his lip. He did not want to remember that day. “Do you think he’ll hate you any less for this, James?”

“I’m rather hoping he won’t,” said James, and rubbed the powder between his fingers. “He shouldn’t have tried to raise my son if he couldn’t keep him safe. I’m going now, Remus,” he added, and then tossed the dust into the fire. The flames flared green.

“I think you’re making a mistake,” Remus whispered.

James shook his head and took a single stride forward, calling, “Department of Magical Family and Child Services!” Remus kept trying to persuade him out of his chosen course of action, but he couldn’t actually offer a rationalization of his arguments, other than that it was the wrong thing to do. James would need stronger arguments than that.

I should have done this before, he thought, as he whirled through the fireplaces. I never should have listened to Harry. He tries, Merlin knows, but he can’t guard his own life the way that he guards others’. He’s always going to take risks as long as he thinks that he should. So just restrict him from the outside world, and don’t let him be around anyone he thinks he needs to save, and he should be safe.

It was such a simple solution that James was frankly surprised that it had never occurred to Snape. He had never thought the man was stupid. Stubborn, pig-headed, a bastard, yes, but not stupid.
That only proves that he doesn’t really care about Harry, James decided as he stepped out of the Floo at his destination. There was a polite little carpet to catch the soot that came with him. If he really cared, he would have thought of this solution and asked me to take Harry back myself.

“Mr. Potter!” gushed the witch sitting behind the desk, rising to shake his hand. “We’ve heard so much about you! Please, won’t you sit down and take a cup of tea? My name is Hellebore Shiverwood. Professor Snape and your son should be here in a moment.”

James shook the woman’s hand, and looked her over carefully. Hellebore Shiverwood looked a sensible witch in her early forties, in the kind of casual dark robes that most Ministry employees favored. Her green eyes sparkled at him with something near hero-worship, though. James supposed that was the cause of her gushing.

Well, never let it be said that I can’t use that to my advantage.

Instead of letting go of Hellbore’s hand when the shaking was done, he shifted his clasp to her wrist and raised it to his lips, kissing her palm. Hellebore blushed as he murmured, “Your pardon, madam. My shock overcame me, and led to ill manners. Such beauty can do that to a man.”

The witch ducked her head and said, “Well, Mr. Potter, really.” But she gestured him to a chair in front of her desk with a benevolent motion. “Now, are you sure that you won’t take a cup of tea?”

“One would be lovely, thank you.” James looked around the room. It was almost bare, with only one portrait in the middle of each wall. The portraits were all of children. James blinked when he realized that one child was dressed as if he came from a Dark pureblood family, one from a Light pureblood family, one from a Muggleborn one—that was reinforced by the Muggle bicycle next to her, which she kept idly kicking with one leg when she wasn’t grinning out of the portrait—and one from a family of mixed heritage. I hadn’t expected the office to be so open about serving all magical children.

Hellebore Shiverwood came back to her desk, and gave him the cup of tea. James accepted it, studying her the while. It would be a mistake to underestimate her. The witch who could decorate her office like this would probably take the duties of her position seriously, and if she thought Harry was better off with Snape, then she wouldn’t hesitate to assign him there.

But Hellebore smiled at him, and James relaxed. She liked him, he reminded himself. Besides, she would have a natural prejudice in favor of blood family unless she was dealing with a case of abuse; most wizards and witches did.

“And here they are,” said Hellebore, abruptly glancing up as the door of her office opened. “Ah, welcome, welcome! A happy late summer to you!”

James smiled grimly as he rose to his feet to face the thief of his son. It is too much to hope that he might come to his senses as on his own, or I might have been content to handle this a different way. But Snape always did have to be cowed by a show of naked force.

“Ardesco!”

Snape nodded as Harry’s Intense Flame spell caused the nearest wooden figure to take fire from the inside, consuming itself in a burst of flames and ashes. Harry stepped back and turned calmly to face him. Harry was almost always calm lately, Snape had noticed, the turmoil in his mind that Snape could feel through the passive link soothed into silver silence. That was obviously a sign that the treatment was working. Harry also seemed to have adapted to the partial loss of Draco, and no longer pestered him. Everything was working.

Of course it is, said the voice of the scorpion of ice inside him. When you go cold, then everything makes much more sense, and everything is for the best.

Snape could not understand how he had endured before, when every attack on Harry made his heart stutter and race. Now he knew about them, and how to prevent them, before they happened.

“Better,” he allowed. “But you will need to be quicker. I saw that you could not choose your target for several seconds. When many enemies are charging you at once, you must choose at once and cast to kill.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, and Snape could feel his thoughts turning inside his head, as excited as they ever got, pulling down the
information, studying it, and shoving it firmly into place. He relaxed in the next moment and dipped his head. “Isn’t it almost time for the meeting with Madam Shiverwood and my father, sir?”

Snape sneered in spite of himself. “Do not call him your father,” he said, turning towards the cauldron in the corner. Yes, the potion with the candle floating on it was ready. Snape scooped out a ladle full of it and dipped it into the vial he had ready, then tucked it into his robes. He could feel the spike of Harry’s startlement, but by the time he turned back, his charge had his eyes on the floor again.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

Snape gestured ahead of him. “We will take the Floo from the Headmaster’s office to the Minister’s,” he said. “He evidently wishes to speak with us before we meet with Madam Shiverwood and Potter.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry repeated, almost the only words he used around Snape these days, and then turned and walked ahead of him.

Snape let the cold rage fill his own thoughts until they were slick and glittering, like ice. The vial in his pocket might have burned a hole there, which would have been a good joke, considering what it was meant to do. Snape had not yet decided on a name for this particular potion, and he considered that, in the frozen rationality of his mind, as they waited for the gargoyle to leap aside and rode the moving staircase upward.

A name came to him, a myth, a legend, a story, and Snape felt his lips curl in grim amusement, the only kind he felt these days.

_The Meleager Potion. Yes, I think that will do quite nicely._

Enjoying his private joke, Snape almost did not notice that they had entered the Headmaster’s office until Albus’s voice surrounded them. “Ah, boys,” he was saying, as he handed a pinch of Floo powder to Harry. “Off to meet the Minister, then?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry.

Snape narrowed his eyes. _Why does he sound almost the same saying that to Albus as to me? What is wrong with the boy? I know that he does not trust Albus, and I had thought he trusted me._

He made a mental note to speak with Harry later, and sneered at the twinkle in the Headmaster’s eyes as he watched Harry cast the Floo into the flames and call, with no prompting, “Minister Fudge’s office!”

The flames turned green, and they were through.

They emerged in a room far, far too overdecorated for the man it was meant to serve, Snape thought, sneering in a circle. It had portraits of former Ministers on the walls—gilded ones. It had a large chair behind the desk—large and comfortable enough to hold the half-breed gamekeeper. The desk itself was made of polished ironwood—a luxury for someone like Fudge. Snape touched the vial in his pocket again, and slid the stopper off with long-practiced fingers. The Meleager Potion seeped out slowly, thick and viscous, coating his fingers. That was all right. This particular potion, unlike the one he had given Potter, had to be ingested to be effective.

And it smelled like chocolate, so that was not a problem.

“Ah, ah, Professor Snape, Mr. Potter!” Fudge was coming around his desk towards them, his hand already extended. “So nice to see you again, and under more auspicious circumstances than the last ones were!” He nodded to Snape with a foolish beam.

Snape simply sneered at him, but reluctantly extended his potion-smeared hand to be shaken. Fudge shook it, then blinked and peered at his fingers.

“My apologies, Minister,” said Snape smoothly. “I was called…rather abruptly from my work, and I am afraid that some of the products of my brewing were still on my hands. I have a bit of cloth that—”

“No, no,” said Fudge, with a faint, faraway look in his eyes. _The potion’s scent has some intoxicating properties when it is ready_, Snape noted to himself, as he watched Fudge happily lick the potion from his fingers. It was something he had
suspected, but hadn’t been able to test, for obvious reasons. “I rather like chocolate,” Fudge said, with a wink at Snape, when he was finished. “And, of course, you can’t make poisons all the time, no matter how grim! Eh? Eh?”

Snape merely stared at him, and Fudge’s smile withered. He turned to Harry. “Hello, young Mr. Potter. Quite a mischievous article you published about me, really!” He shook his head and clucked his tongue. “You like making up fabulous stories, don’t you?”

Harry’s mind remained calm. Snape narrowed his eyes. How did the boy do that? Occlumency, obviously, but I had not thought him so far advanced. I must remind him to tell me everything.

“They weren’t stories, Minister Fudge,” said Harry. “They were true. You know it. You were there, even as I was.”

Fudge’s smile withered again. He tried to recover by replacing it with an even wider, brighter one, but the effort was obviously strained. He walked behind his desk and shuffled some pieces of parchment, looking at his hands as though they were going to give him an answer any moment now.

“The fact of the matter is, Mr. Potter,” he said at last, looking up, “I’ve had some—unpleasant letters as the result of your article.”

“Howlers, Minister?” Harry asked, as though he were genuinely interested.

“Not only Howlers, not only Howlers,” said Fudge, and coughed. “Others. There are apparently, ah, many citizens of our fair island who take a great deal more interest in our government than I ever knew. There is, in particular, one assault—that is to say, one series of forceful messages coming from one section of them, suggesting I resign.” He leaned forward and stared directly into Harry’s eyes, as if he thought that would make a difference. “The Dark pureblooded families.”

“Fancy that,” said Harry politely.

“It’s, well, rather been taking up my time lately, and Madam Umbridge’s,” said Fudge, with a fake laugh. “I would appreciate it, Mr. Potter, if you could tell them that there’s really nothing to be concerned about. It would mean a lot, if you could stand at my side for one of Ms. Honeywhistle’s articles and reassure them that what you said happened really wasn’t as bad as all that.”

“But it was, Minister,” said Harry.

Snape stared at him again. The boy was an absolute wall. His shields weren’t letting any emotion through except calm, polite interest, not even a hint of amusement. Snape frowned. I know he can shield well, but to do it this well, he must have some hidden motivation. And he hasn’t discussed that with me, either. The ice in him rattled.

Fudge’s mouth opened, and hung there like that for a moment. Then he closed it with a little click. “You aren’t, ah, you won’t change your mind, then?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

Snape watched Fudge attempt to stand up straight and give Harry a stern look. He might as well have been giving a cloud a stern look. Harry just watched him, and then the Minister turned away and pouted, like a child.

“Fine, then,” he said. “Go to your meeting with your father and Madam Shiverwood, Mr. Potter. I hope that you’ll find more there to content you than you can seem to find here with me.”

“I’m sure I will, Minister,” said Harry, so smoothly that Snape didn’t even notice the vicious insult until they were almost out of the office. Then he shook his head and caught up with Harry as his ward studied a map on the wall, locating the Department of Magical Family and Child Services.

“Why are you shielding like this?” he hissed at Harry, just to make sure they weren’t overheard. A wizard was walking down the hall behind them, heading for Fudge’s office.

Harry turned to him. “I thought about what you said, sir,” he said, also keeping his voice low and carefully correct. “That I should have some trust in you, and spend some time apart from Draco. But I can’t spend all my time apart from Draco; sometimes he wants me there. So I’ve been shielding the emotions that would keep me from achieving those goals, and only letting through the ones that would help.” He shrugged and gave Snape a small smile. “You were right, sir. It works much
better. And I’ve been more productive and happy since I started doing this.”

He certainly had been, Snape had to admit, with some trepidation that he couldn’t place. Draco had been thriving, talking to other Slytherins besides Harry about some of the subjects he’d uncovered in his research, happily monopolizing Harry’s time when he did want him there, and occasionally coming to Snape to demand extra books that Hogwarts’s library didn’t have. And Harry had been practicing his Dark Arts spells with more determination and dedication, and not asking Snape nearly as many questions, which in turn left him more time to go on with the potions and other methods of defense that would secure Harry’s life.

He supposed what had disconcerted him was the completeness and swiftness of Harry’s change. But when the boy decided he was going to do something, he did it.

He nodded to Harry and stepped back. “So long as we are agreed that that is the only reason you are shielding,” he said.

“Of course, sir,” said Harry, looking puzzled. “I only want to make you and Draco happy, to make up for some of the worry I’ve put you through.”

*I cannot find anything wrong with that,* Snape thought, a tension he hadn’t realized was there falling from his shoulders.

“Excuse me,” said a voice from behind Snape’s shoulder. “I hate to intrude, but I felt the boy’s power just now, and he does look familiar from the newspaper articles. I thought I should introduce myself.”

Snape turned and sneered at the wizard automatically. He had long golden hair braided with golden bells, and his robes were thick and heavy, elaborate with golden sigils in a language that Snape knew was one of protection. His eyes were blue, and startlingly direct. He met Snape’s gaze without blinking before he looked at Harry.

“My name is Augustus Starrise,” he said.

Harry dipped his head in a polite bow. “How do you do, sir?”

Starrise nodded back to him. “We have received your reply,” he said. “We are considering how to respond. You truly are a master of the written word, Potter. I congratulate you.” He smiled, a sharp expression. “That does not mean, of course, that we will stop advising the Minister. I hope that your meeting goes well, and that you are back in your blood father’s custody by the end of the day. A child should be with his parents.” His eyes raked Snape up and down, and his eyebrows rose. “Not with someone who might teach him Dark magic, however well-intentioned.”

Snape fought the urge to snarl. He hated Light pureblooded wizards even more than Dark ones. They were far more open with their opinions, since they considered it a matter of honesty and honor to be.

“You were the one who arranged this, then?” Harry asked, and his emotions briefly stirred.

“Of course. Fudge is not clever enough to come up with this plan on his own.” Starrise shook his head, making the bells in his hair clang. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting with our dear Minister to get to.”

He turned and walked off down the hall. Snape clenched his hand on the vial of Meleager Potion and regretted that he did not yet know what would happen if he spread it to a second subject before it had taken effect on the first.

“Let’s go, sir.”

Harry’s hand was on his arm, his voice pitched low enough to soothe. Snape let himself be soothed, and drawn along. He wondered when their positions had reversed, and Harry had become the one to offer him comfort.

*When he made his change, I suspect.*

They found Madam Shiverwood’s office easily enough, and entered. Snape could see James Potter rising to his feet as they did, a hard smile on his lips.

It was time. Potter would have absorbed the potion through his fingers when he read Snape’s letter, and it had had a few days to settle inside him—inert until its creator spoke the operative spell, of course.

Snape laid his hand on the wand in his robe pocket and whispered, “*Augesco*.”
Then he watched in contentment as the potion took effect.

******

Harry had braced himself for the first sight of his father. It hit him like a knife blade between the shoulders, like Madam Umbridge’s Lamina Alba hex, but thanks to his shields, he was able to part the surface of his mind, receive the shock, and then absorb it again, swallowing it like a stone dropping into a pool.

“Hello, James,” he said, remembering just in time that Snape had said he wasn’t to refer to him as his father.

James drew breath as if to reply, and then sealed his lips together. A weird, high-pitched giggle edged out of his mouth.

Harry blinked and glanced at Snape, only to find his eyes half-shut and locked on James’s face. An expression of lazy pleasure was there, though someone else would have known only that Snape was smirking, Harry was sure.

“Mr. Potter?” the witch behind the desk asked worriedly.

“My name isn’t Mr. Potter,” James said, tossing his head, as though he were a child. “My name is Mr. Ragglemuffin, King of the Raggles, and I insist that you treat me as such. Where is my throne?”

Harry swallowed. That would be Snape’s plan, then. I suppose he couldn’t pass up a chance to humiliate his old rival.

Then he scolded himself for thinking that. He didn’t know Snape’s motivations, not all of them, but he knew one of them was his protection. He ought to be grateful for this, not complaining about what it could not be.

The witch stared again, then glanced sternly at Snape. “Professor, if you have cast a spell on Mr. Potter—“

“I assure you, my good woman,” said Snape, “you may examine my wand, and Mr. Potter as well. I have not cast any spell that would harm him.” He drew out his wand and pressed it into Madam Shiverwood’s hand.

“Where is my purple cat?” James was peering about the room, and his hands were patting his knees as though to summon a reluctant animal to him. “Come here, kitty kitty kitty!” Abruptly, he caught sight of Harry, and his face brightened. “A silver cat! That will do instead.”

He bounced towards Harry and held out his arms. Harry took a step backward, unsure of what would happen if he allowed himself to be embraced, and not really wanting it, anyway. He’d got used to Draco touching him in the past few weeks, when he wanted to, and Snape putting his hand on Harry’s shoulder to guide him occasionally. Otherwise, no one else had, and Harry was fine with that.

James grabbed him anyway, practically crushing Harry’s face into his shoulder. “No,” he said. “You aren’t a silver cat, are you? You’re a bunny rabbit, a sweet little bunny rabbit!” He kissed the top of Harry’s head. “Do you want some carrots, little bunny?”

Harry unobtrusively forced magic into his muscles and managed to tear out of his father’s grip before he could feel too uncomfortable. He skipped a few steps backward and looked helplessly at Madam Shiverwood.

James lay down on the floor and began to pull off his robes, singing a nonsense song as he did so. “As I was walking among the lettuce, up came the chief of owls and he said, he said to me, oh nonya nonya no—”

“I—” Madam Shiverwood shook her head and performed a spell on Snape’s wand that Harry recognized as Prior Incantato. A ghostly image of a giggling child welled up, confirming that Snape had cast a Cheering Charm on himself. Madam Shiverwood shook her head again, and then gave the wand back to Snape. “You were worried about this meeting, Professor Snape?” she asked.

“I was.” Snape nodded and stared at James, who was struggling and kicking at his robes as if he had forgotten all about buttons. “I see that I need not have been.” He looked at the witch and sneered. “Unless you will commit a child to the care of someone who clearly has something loose in his head?”

He doesn’t have something loose in his head, Harry thought uneasily. Except what Snape put there. If they think Dad’s somehow crazy, then he might lose custody of Connor, too, and who would Connor go with? Remus legally can’t take him,
and Snape would never agree to.

He forced down the panic that wanted to burgeon. Snape had said to trust him. Harry had to. And Snape had said at the end of May that he cared for Harry just as he was. Surely that meant that anything he did out of that affection could be excused? That it would have to be?

“Look at me!” James shouted, flipping his robes up towards his head. “Look what I can do!”

Harry swallowed his embarrassment at his father’s actions and looked at Madam Shiverwood, to see her watching him.

“How do you feel about going home with your father, Harry?” she asked carefully. “The claim he filed included a petition to remove you from school, so that you might finish out your education at your family home. He said it would be safer for you than the school.”

Harry sighed. “With all due respect, madam, my safety there depends on the wards,” he said, looking at James. “And the wards answer to James. I don’t think he can keep me safe if he’s acting like this. He might let Death Eaters through under the impression that they were the Chief of the Rabbits.”

“Have you ever known him to act like this before?” Madam Shiverwood asked.

Harry shook his head.

The witch looked hard at Snape, who returned her scowl with a perfectly bland expression. Then she sighed. There was anger and disappointment and disgust in the sigh, but also resignation. “I cannot send a child home with someone who acts like this,” she agreed. “You may retain temporary custody of Harry, Professor Snape. We—“

“Have to pee!” James shouted.

The strong smell of urine a moment later confirmed that he wasn’t kidding. Harry tried, desperately, not to look in his direction.

The witch blinked a few times, slowly, then said, “I think it best if you leave now, Professor, Harry. I shall make sure to escort Mr. Potter home.” She nodded rather helplessly to Harry. “I hope that you will be happy with the professor, Harry, and that this problem will be solved as soon as possible.” Her eyes slid to Snape.

Snape simply stared back, then turned and marched out of the office. Harry scrambled to catch up.

“Is it permanent, sir?” he asked, when he was sure they were far enough from the office that Madam Shiverwood couldn’t hear them.

“I don’t wish to tell you,” said Snape.

Harry flinched from the coldness in his tone, and reminded himself, again, that he’d resolved to stop asking Snape so many questions. His guardian was busy, and always had his best intentions at heart. He took the concern and slid it under his shields. It was up to him to make sure that James wouldn’t be hurt permanently by the potion. Snape couldn’t be bothered. He waited for relief and joy to bubble up, since he was still under Snape’s guardianship.

When it came, it was…rather muted, really.

*******

Harry sighed and looked away from Connor’s stricken face. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “I’m just going to make sure that it’s not permanent, that’s all. I think I know some of the ingredients that Snape used in the potion. I recognized them by scent, and you know that he taught me about Potions theory this summer. I’m fairly sure that I can mix up an antidote soon.”

He turned a hopeful grin on his brother. “But, of course, Snape might even reverse it before then, once he’s decided that James isn’t going to come after me again.”

Connor shook his head slowly and leaned against the wall outside the Great Hall, closing his eyes. “I still don’t understand,” he whispered. “I—you’ve taught me, Harry, never to take pleasure in someone else’s suffering. How could you just leave him under the potion, smarting and humiliated like that?”
Harry winced. He wondered what he could have done to both keep Snape’s trust and avoid hurting his brother. It didn’t seem there was anything, so he would have to live with this consequence, too. “I’ll reverse it,” he said. “I promise.”

Connor opened his eyes and gave him a bleak look.

“Do you still want me to give you those lessons, tomorrow?” Harry asked him softly.

“Yeah, I guess,” said Connor, and shuffled into the Great Hall. Harry watched him go with a faint frown, then turned his head. The Slytherin table was filling up for dinner, and he wandered over to it with a slight feeling of disorientation. Everything had gone so well for a few days, and now…this. First failure.

_Snape’s an idiot_, Regulus volunteered.

Harry smiled a little in spite of himself, if only because it was so like something Sylarana would have said. _What about this time?_ he asked, as he sat down next to Millicent and reached for the plate of bread.

_Because he must have known that you’d have questions about the potion, but he didn’t bother to answer them_. Regulus made what sounded like a noise of deep disgust in his throat, and Harry wondered how he could do that, since he didn’t have a throat to make it with right now. _What kind of responsible adult does that?_

_A busy one_, Harry said back, and distracted Regulus. Most people liked to talk about themselves more than they liked to talk about other people’s problems. Besides, this was a problem that needed attention. _When are you going to drop the wards and let Narcissa into Grimmauld Place to search for you?_

Sullen silence.

Harry sighed and spread butter on his bread. _You know that you have to, sooner or later_.

Peeved silence.

Harry shook his head, and looked up as he saw two post owls flap in through the windows of the Great Hall. It was almost sunset, the enchanted ceiling reflecting the shine of red and gold light through the window, and it made the owls glow as they both swooped towards him.

Harry murmured his thanks and fed the ordinary barn owl before he accepted the letter from the other owl with a grave nod. This was Julius, Lucius Malfoy’s truce-owl, and it would have been an insult to feed him. He ruffled his feathers at Harry instead, and soared out the window, followed quickly by the other owl.

Harry opened the truce-letter first. It was a short message, as he had expected it would be. They were near the end of the dance.

_Harry:

_I look forward to seeing you again on the longest night. Meanwhile, on the night of mingled light and dark, in perfect balance, I ask you for a favor. I shall not demand that you fulfill it yet, but I ask that you keep it in mind. My gift is the chance for you to owe me a debt._

_Lucius Malfoy._

Harry nodded. He would ask Mr. Malfoy for a favor in return, but he would wait and think about it before he sent the letter making the formal request. After all, if he found an immediate use for the favor, he might as well use it instead of just asking for one. And he had until winter solstice, and the end of the dance, to reply.

He opened the other letter, which bore only his name on the envelope, and froze when he recognized the handwriting.

_Dear Harry:

There was a Muggle poet, once. Or so they say. In truth, his family line carried wizarding blood from France, through a distant cousin of mine. He himself may have been a Squib. His minor magic doing its best to protect him would have explained how he stayed alive so often when he seemed so determined to kill himself. There was nothing he would not try:
scaling Culver Cliff, swimming in cold northern waters, drinking himself nearly to death, visiting flagellation brothels.

He wrote of many strange things, strange and fabulous, but none stranger than he did long after his supposed cure and taming, his turning from Dark wildness to Light domesticity. He called it a vision, a nymph-frenzy. I think he may actually have met Pan in the woods.

Lord God of life and of light and of all things fair, he sang.
Lord God of ravin and ruin and all things dim…

There are some who watch, Harry, and know that one in power may be both “of life and of light and of all things fair,” and “of ravin and ruin and all things dim.” Never think to evade our eyes.

Evan Rosier.

Harry shook his head and put the letter on the table. Millicent snatched it up at once, and Harry couldn’t even find the strength to stop her.

“Strange,” Millicent commented, and then stopped when her eyes alit on the signature. She frowned at Harry. “Why do you accept post from people who tried to kill you?”

Harry shook his head and started to respond, but in that moment, most of the last colors of sunset drained out of the sky, and pain exploded in his head, his scar.

Harry gasped, bowing his head, too startled to try and hide, and felt hands clamp on his shoulders. But that was nothing compared to the grip in his mind, squeezing and pulling as though someone would yank his brain out through the back of his skull.

He heard Regulus scream, once, in a voice so horrified and devastated that Harry tried to reach out to him, tried to follow that connection that he’d never been able to sense.

Then Regulus was gone.

Harry lay with his head on the table, panting, trying desperately to soothe the jumbled pain in his head, and hang on to his sanity, and figure out what in the hell had just happened.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventeen: Not-So-Private Lessons

Regulus?

There was no answer.

Harry sighed and stepped into the abandoned classroom where he’d asked Connor to meet him for his lessons in leadership. He’d been reaching out for Regulus since he vanished, trying everything he could think of, from simple shouts of his name to slurs against his family, which might bring him roaring back in anger. There was nothing, and Harry thought that if Regulus could hear him, he would have responded.

That left him being gone, or dead.

Harry shook his head with a frown as he considered the second thought and set his magic to Vanishing the dust from the desks and corners. I don’t believe that. I’m nearly certain that his body is in a Black house somewhere, and the wards are tight around all of them. How would Voldemort have broken through those, as weak as he is right now? And we’d soon know if he was back in his full power. He would have come after either Connor or me first, I think, instead of Regulus.

So I think his voice is gone for right now, but not his body. Harry bit his lip and sighed. And since I have no way of contacting him as he is right now, I think I had best contact Narcissa and tell her about my suspicions. If there’s any way she can still get into Grimmauld Place, then she should.

Harry was just finishing the last of the dusting when he felt the fragile quiver behind his temple that indicated Draco wanted Harry to come and help him, or sit in admiring silence at his feet, or suggest books to look in for research on Julia Malfoy
and her time period. Harry hesitated for a moment, then shook his head, with slow determination. Draco knew this was the time when Harry had promised to give Connor lessons, since it was Saturday and they had no classes. Harry had explained that to him, and he was sure Draco had understood. Harry didn’t see the need to leave and go to him now.

Someone knocked on the door. Connor peeked around it, and Harry found his face relaxing into a smile. His brother’s company seemed positively undemanding these days, next to Snape’s, where Harry had to choke back many of the tendencies that had become natural around the Potions Master, and Draco’s, where Harry was still making the wrong decisions half the time, as Draco’s mind changed like quicksilver.

Of course, the first thing Connor said was, “Have you found the potion that could cure Dad’s madness yet?”

Harry let the smile fall away from his face, and shook his head. “No, sorry, Connor.” The fact was that he knew at least two ways of finding out the potion’s ingredients and brewing an antidote, but both of them would make Snape very angry. Harry fought a small battle every day about whether risking his guardian’s anger was worth letting his father suffer. The part of him that said he shouldn’t make Snape angry was losing, slowly but steadily.

Connor sighed. “Let’s just——”

The door creaked open again, and Ron stuck his head in. “Room for two?” he asked, when he caught Harry’s eye.

Harry blinked. “I suppose so. But why?” He wouldn’t have thought that Ron was very interested in the kinds of history and philosophy that Harry aimed to teach Connor, or at least knew about some of it already, through living in a pureblood family.

“Connor said that you’re a good teacher, when you want to be.” Ron shrugged and padded over to sit down at one of the tables, idly running his fingers over the clean surface. “And I’m bored. It’s not going to be the same without Quidditch this year, you know.” He said that with a deep disgust in his tone.

“They’re not letting us play?” Harry reflected that nearly everyone else seemed to know more about what went on in the school than he did. Of course, he’d been busy with Snape and Draco and trying to find Regulus and writing suggestions to Skeeter for another article on the Minister in the past few days, but he wouldn’t have thought he would miss an announcement like that.

Ron gave him a sharp look. “Yes. And the Headmaster just smiled mysteriously and refused to explain why. You must have heard him say that, Harry. It was just at dinner last night.”

“Oh,” said Harry, remembering. He’d been helping Draco research necromancy last night, and had lost track of enough time that he missed dinner. He shrugged. “Sorry, but I wonder why? You’re absolutely sure that the Headmaster didn’t say?” That might explain why the professors, except Snape, had been gossiping about lately, but Harry didn’t see why the banning of Quidditch would concern anyone save the Heads of House.

“Just said that we’d understand later.” Ron dropped his head on the desk. “I know he’s a great man and all—Dad says he’s brilliant—but he’s barmy sometimes.”

Harry privately agreed with that assessment. “All right, then, let’s——”

The door creaked again, and Hermione came in, taking a place at a desk. Unlike Ron, she seemed to notice how clean it was, but she just raised an eyebrow at Harry and pulled a piece of parchment, her quill, and her inkwell out of the bag she was carrying, which Harry would normally expect to be full of books.

“And what are you doing here?” Harry asked. If there’s one student in school that doesn’t need extra lessons, it’s Hermione.

“I’ll go if you don’t want me here,” said Hermione.

Harry looked at her hard, hearing an injured tone in her voice. He sighed when he recognized it. It was true that he’d been rather neglecting Hermione lately. He didn’t know how to make up for it. Politics and talking to Fawkes—who could only offer a limited array of chirps without a house elf to translate—and Draco and Snape had consumed a lot of his time, that was true, but he could still have found some hours to spend with her.

“No, that’s fine,” he said. “But I would have thought that you already knew everything I did.”

Hermione’s scowl grew pronounced. “I would have thought the library would have more information on pureblood rituals
than it does,” she muttered. “Too many of the books just say something like And of course this connects to the Rite of the Scorpion that the Starrise family performed on full moon nights of victory over their enemies, but then they don’t explain what the Rite of the Scorpion is. I’m sure I’m missing a lot, and I have to know the whole thing.”

Harry relaxed. Hermione’s motivation was easier to deal with, at least. He wondered how she’d missed getting into Ravenclaw. “Well, teaching three people won’t be much different than teaching one, I suppose.”

“Six.”

Harry raised his eyebrows as Cho entered, nodding cheerfully at him. Luna wandered in just behind her, giving Harry a rather vague smile. Padma Patil followed both of them. Harry eyed her warily, but if she had any of her sister Parvati’s tendency to giggle, it didn’t show in the way she carefully arranged her books and parchment on one of the desks.

“All right, then.” Harry didn’t ask why they’d come. They were Ravenclaws, and Ravenclaws who genuinely seemed to enjoy learning, from what he’d seen of them. “Then I’ll start.” He began, giving the classroom door one more suspicious look, but this time it didn’t seem inclined to admit more people.

“I wanted to ask my brother who he thinks the main people he’d have to persuade to follow him are.” He fastened his gaze on Connor, feeling no remorse at putting his brother on the spot. It was time Connor learned to deal with some of the attention that had been flicking away from him this year, as people whispered and giggled about Harry’s abduction.

Connor flushed. “I, ah. Dark wizards?”

Harry cocked his head. “You think of them as a block?”

“Aren’t they?”

Harry shook his head. “Dark wizards don’t all want the same thing, and they don’t even all share the same allegiance,” he said, falling easily into the patterns of the book learning he’d had from his mother. “Really, there are two kinds of Dark wizards, even though they both get lumped together as the same thing most of the time. There are declared ones, sworn to a Dark Lord or some ideal—an ill-defined one, really—of keeping Dark magic legal. Then there are just wizards and witches who will use Dark spells.” Hermione’s quill was speeding across her parchment, Harry noticed in amusement. Well, he supposed he couldn’t blame her. She studied everything, and their Defense Against the Dark Arts professors so far hadn’t covered much of the history of how Dark and Light magic appeared among the wizarding families. “Both often practice what are called the Dark rituals and the Dark pureblood dances of manners. Then there are the same distinctions for Light wizards, except, of course, that they often follow Light Lords, and fight to keep everything the same as it has been a few centuries, since the last Minister who really tolerated Dark magic. Their rituals are different.”

Hermione looked up, the dawning of consciousness in her eyes. “That was why I was finding so many different rituals,” she whispered. “Some of them were Light, and some Dark.”

Harry nodded. “As to how they’re connected, and whether a certain ritual is Light or Dark…well, they might depend on free will or compulsion. Or they might depend on taming, bridling, and confining, or letting loose, freeing, unbinding. Or they might be concerned with identifying the truth, which is defined as Light magic, or hiding and subterfuge, which is Dark.”

Connor, Harry saw, was following with a frown, and looking as though he wished he had brought some parchment. “But lots of people use glamours or illusions, and those aren’t called Dark Arts,” he said.

Harry nodded again. “They aren’t called that. They are Dark, but only under one definition of the term. There are lots of definitions. Another one is the Light magic is often cooperative, done with many wizards working together, while many Dark spells and arts are solitary.”

Hermione scribbled that down, too. “I knew that,” she said defensively, when Harry looked at her. “But the way you explain it is a lot simpler and clearer.”

Only she would think that, Harry thought with amusement, and then looked over Hermione’s bowed head, something he was just getting used to being tall enough to do. Well, her and the Ravenclaws. Ron and Connor looked nearly overwhelmed. “I’ve had time to think about it, and to study it.”

Hermione gave him a long, slow look. “I heard something about that,” she said. “But not everything in detail. Why do you know so much about Dark Arts and spells and rituals, Harry?”
“Lucky, I guess,” said Harry. “And I have a really good memory. I usually only have to read a book once to remember most of the information.” It was true, as it happened, but it slid him neatly past the awkward moment when the Ravenclaw girls might have started asking why he’d been trained so much as a child. Harry was uncomfortable with them knowing what they might already, that he’d been trained as Connor’s protector. He was not going to get into the phoenix web or what they would probably want to call abuse. They were sure not to understand what it had really been like. “So, Connor, you’ll have to persuade Dark wizards declared and unaligned, and Light wizards declared and unaligned, and then of course those families and individual wizards who aren’t either.”

“And where do Muggleborns fit into all this?” Hermione asked. Harry thought she was honestly curious. It wasn’t the kind of thing that most people talked about openly in Hogwarts, except maybe in Muggle Studies, wary as they were of stepping straight into subjects no one wanted to be forced to take a side on.

“Depends on whether or not they stay in the wizarding world, and where,” said Harry. “Sometimes they declare for Dark or Light. Sometimes they marry into a family which has an allegiance, and adopt that. Sometimes they use both Dark and Light magic, anything short of the Unforgivable Curses, and stay in the middle. And a lot of them go back to the Muggle world, of course.”

Hermione shook her head. “That’s stupid.”

“I quite agree, Granger,” said a sharp voice from the doorway. “No sense in wasting education on people who are only going to misuse it.”

Harry jerked his head up. This time, he hadn’t heard the door creak. Draco was standing there, looking straight at him, and his face was furious.

Harry lowered his head, and piled shields on top of shields. He had been irritated at Draco for forgetting that he was going to spend the morning with Connor. But why had he been irritated? Of course Draco would want him to be there anyway.

He could feel his whole mind shifting and changing, adapting itself into the small quiet thing that it usually was of late around Draco, but a glance at his friend’s face showed that was not going to be enough.

******

Draco tapped a finger on his book. Perhaps he’d been spoiled, but he’d got quite used to Harry showing up whenever he wanted him; he’d accepted that Harry was probably watching him by magical means for any such occurrence. And this was taking much longer than it should have, even if he was down in the Great Hall or out on the Quidditch Pitch when Draco thought about him.

Then he remembered that Harry had said something about teaching Connor lessons in leadership this morning.

*As if that prat could learn anything,* Draco thought, and stood, storming out of the library. He went to the classroom that Harry had used to try and “educate” Connor last year. They would be there, if they were anywhere. Harry had to learn that sometimes Draco needed him, too.

Except that they weren’t there, and it took an unconscionably long time of wandering among the empty classrooms until Draco found them. By then, his temper was near the boiling point, and he entered just after some crack by Granger about how it would be stupid for Mudbloods to go back to the Muggle world. Draco felt compelled to agree with her.

He looked at Harry.

For a moment, a stir of unease struck him as he watched Harry’s eyes widen and then drop from his face, and how his posture changed, flowing from an almost teacher-like one to one that Draco could well imagine standing or sitting near him, poised to give but not attract attention. It rather reminded him of last year, when Harry had sometimes acted like that around his brother. If there was one person whom Draco didn’t want to be compared to, it was Connor Potter.

But then he shook off the idea. Harry was probably just apologetic for wasting his time here when he could have been with Draco. And hadn’t Draco given him a lot of attention last year, and gone dashing off to his side whenever Harry wanted? It was nothing more than Harry owed him in return.

“Come here,” he said, walking towards Harry.
Weasley was on his feet in an instant, getting between him and Harry. Draco sneered at him. He didn’t have much time for Weasley. He had Harry and the potion to brew, and the potion and Harry, and that was enough for him right now. Oh, sure, sometimes he did talk to other people, because he couldn’t spend all his time researching the potion or talking to Harry, but those people certainly didn’t include Weasley.

“Out of the way,” he said.

Weasley had the audacity to shake his head. His face was bright and flushed. Draco hoped, spitefully, that he had some idea of how unattractive he looked, despite the fact that he couldn’t give him that much credit for intelligence. “How can you just order Harry around like that?” he demanded. “You can’t just order him around like that.”

Draco blinked. “I wasn’t giving him an order. I was just telling him how things were going to be.” He was sure that he had given Harry a choice with his tone. It hadn’t been an order or a command. He knew that Harry would despise orders or commands, and that he spent as much time as he did with Draco because he genuinely wanted to spend time with him, nothing else. “Come on, Harry,” he added, making sure his voice was coaxing this time, looking over Weasley’s shoulder. Harry still didn’t meet his gaze. “You do want to come work with me, don’t you?”

Harry didn’t respond. Draco could feel the anger bubbling up in his chest again. He needed Harry’s help, and he didn’t need Harry spending his time with these tossers, among whom, he saw with a faint sneer, was the Chang bitch. Why would Harry want to spend time with them, anyway? It wasn’t as though they were his friends who’d risked their lives for him again and again, or who loved him the way that Draco did.

Sometimes Draco felt as if he didn’t understand his own mind through the dizzying swirl of emotions and ambitions that occupied it, but what he did understand told him distinctly that Harry was his and no one else’s. He’d felt that for years, really, but now he knew why, and he wasn’t about to let the realization go again.

The thing that really puzzled Draco was why Harry wasn’t saying anything about this. He should have been, if he was so interested in coming to work with Draco, but he only sat there, his head bowed and drooping, his eyes on the floor. He seemed to be taking several deep breaths, as if to stave off a panic attack. But Draco knew when Harry’s panic attacks happened. They happened after he was possessed by evil Dark Lords or when he had too many people staring at him. Neither was true now, so it couldn’t be a panic attack.

“Come on, Harry,” he said again, feeling angry at having to repeat himself.

A voice from the doorway said, “Merlin, but you’re a pompous git, Malfoy.”

If there was one thing that offended Zacharias Smith, it was lack of intelligence.

He was willing to concede that some people didn’t know much about some things (from his experience at Hogwarts, “some people” amounted to “most of the other students”), but that ignorance could be corrected. If someone wanted to know something, they could ask. If someone realized they didn’t know something, and no one else did either, they could seek to remedy the lack themselves. There was a library upstairs, and minds residing in the professors’ heads, or at least most of them. Zacharias did not believe in native stupidity. It was only ignorance, what you got when other people didn’t care enough to educate themselves.

But he did believe in a kind of willful stupidity, and he saw it in full flight when he wandered by the classroom where, just maybe, on the slimmest of chances, he might have seen Hermione Granger heading about ten minutes ago.

It offended him more than anything else in the world to see Draco Malfoy standing in front of Harry Potter and talking as if it wasn’t perfectly obvious that Potter was going into what his great-grandmother called avuluchia. Zacharias considered that she knew what she was talking about, being a Veela and everything, and here it was. Potter wanted to do two things, very badly, and neither side was letting up, sending him into mental paralysis.

Merlin, Malfoy ought to have known something was wrong just by the way he’s looking at the floor. Potter doesn’t do that.

“Merlin, but you’re a pompous git, Malfoy,” Zacharias drawled, stepping through the door and leaning against it. His eyes...
 lingered on Hermione as she turned to stare at the door, but that was just coincidence, really. And if he happened to notice
that she had most of a parchment covered in writing, and wanted to nod in approval, what of it? Being smart was nothing to
sneer at. “What gives you the right to treat Potter like your little plush dragon? Real wizards give up on playing with those
dragons when they’re six.”

Malfoy flushed. Zacharias nodded, happy to have his suspicions confirmed. “You didn’t, did you? You were probably
playing with it until you got your Hogwarts letter, and then you put it away and pretended that you’d never heard of it.”

“Shut up, Smith,” Malfoy had the gall to hiss, as if he really thought he could shut someone up who had more than a
scattering of intelligence that way. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, I do,” said Zacharias, and stepped into the classroom. He noticed three Ravenclaws there, all girls of good family, good
Light wizarding stock, and nodded to them. Really, Malfoy was an idiot, and not acting like one, to believe that Potter would
be unsafe with this lot.

But he didn’t believe in native idiocy, only in native ignorance, so that meant he could help educate Malfoy out of it.

Zacharias smiled. He was going to enjoy this.

“You put your little plush dragon away only a day before you got your Hogwarts letter, or the hour after it,” he said, directing
his attention to Malfoy again. Pompos git. Braggart, throwing his money and his weight around. I wonder if his father ever
told him that his great-grandfather was one of the poorest purebloods around for a long time? Illegal gambling won most of
the Malfoy property back, and ever since then, they’ve been acting as though they’re old money. Old name, new money, not a
lick of common sense. “And then it turned out not to matter, because you immediately found another plush dragon when you
got here. You’ve been hanging on Potter as though he could grant your every wish.”

Zacharias paused to study the wizard who, by now, had looked up and was staring hard at him. Potter’s magic beat around
him like a stream barely dammed, a river peering over the top of the obstruction and ready to flow. “Well,” Zacharias
amended, “he probably could grant your every wish.”

He brought his gaze back to Malfoy’s face. “But that doesn’t mean that you get to ask him to try, you know. A Lord belongs
to everybody. So does a vates.” His great-grandmother had told him about the vates, during all the long days when Zacharias
had sat by her chair with the instruction to “learn something.” Zacharias had surely learned something. “So he doesn’t get to
just educate one person, or grant the wishes of one person. That’s selfishness on your part, and it would be on his. He gets to
belong to the whole of the wizarding world, and lavish his magic on the people he chooses to lavish it on.”

Zacharias looked back at Potter, and if he chose to admire Hermione’s face on the way, no one was there to notice. There
were no natively stupid people, but Zacharias believed firmly that some people were more intelligent and observant than
others, and of the people in this room, only Hermione was his match. She was allowed to notice his looking, if she wanted to.

Potter’s eyes were fastened steadily on his now, and he seemed to be asking what, exactly, Zacharias wanted.

Heavens, he’s not that far gone, is he? Zacharias frowned in thought. Maybe he was. He hadn’t known that Malfoy’s plush-
dragoning of the other wizard had pushed Potter like this, or he would have interfered sooner.

Well, now he could.

“I give you permission to use Legilimency on me, Potter,” he said. “I know you know it. Look into my mind, and see if I’m
not speaking the truth about why the way Malfoy treats you is evil.”

“Shut up, Smith!” Malfoy spat again, and took a step forward, his hands helplessly clenched.

Zacharias gave him a cool look. He could defend himself, if necessary. He didn’t think he should depend on Potter to do it.
“You shut up, Malfoy,” he said. “You owe courtesy and precedent to a wizard as powerful as Potter, at least until he decides
to decline the invitation to look into my mind.”

He glanced back at Potter, who was looking helplessly at Malfoy. “Potter?” he asked.

Harry glanced at him in turn, and Zacharias narrowed his eyes. Oh, honestly. How hesitant can someone with strength like
that get? When he’s past this, I’m going to pick at him with everything in me. No one can afford for him to be this weak.
“Come on, Potter,” he said. “It’s a simple enough spell. One word, and I give you my full permission.” He summoned the memories that he wanted Potter to see to the forefront of his mind. He didn’t know Occlumency, but he knew that it would make it easiest for a wizard entering an unfamiliar mind if he didn’t have to dig for memories. Zacharias was not keen on having it hurt him, either.

Potter whispered, “Legilimens.”

Zacharias felt an odd twisting and pushing, as though someone had slid through an outer curtain to his thoughts he hadn’t even been aware was there. He braced himself not to fight the intrusion, but after that first sensation, there was nothing appreciable. He braced himself with his hands on a desk and hummed, waiting.

The memories were right there, easily accessed.

“But I don’t know what you mean, Grandma,” said Zacharias, sitting at the Veela’s feet in a fall of sunlight. Her room was always lit, enough to touch Zacharias’s heart and cheer him up even on days when the winter sky was faint and pasty everywhere else. Here, the light was golden.

“I mean a vates, my dear, a creature of magic and freedom so extreme that nothing can contain her.” Her hand smoothed across his forehead, and Zacharias shivered. He was too young to know much about what Veela could do, but because he was her blood, she could soothe and enchant him with a touch. “She has to know herself inside and out, and she’ll lose her position in a moment if she tries to make someone do something she doesn’t want to do, but when she’s here, she’ll heal and free all those poor creatures bound in webs to this day.”

Zacharias thought ahead, even at that age. “But what happens if the vates is weak, or shuts herself in a cage?”

Grandma’s voice went sad and cold, both at once. “Then she is dead, and something of beauty and freedom is forever lost to the world.”

Potter pulled out of his head, and Zacharias opened his eyes as the memory ended. He saw Potter’s trembling, and shook his head, clucking his tongue. Perhaps a bit of spurring right now wouldn’t go amiss.

“He’s just acting the way I wanted him to act,” Malfoy said.

Zacharias gave him a smirk. Malfoy sounded like a pathetic little boy. “We did notice,” he told Potter. “There’s an awful lot of people at this school who notice everything you do. Everything. And we’re not about to have our chance at a Lord, or something even better, ruined because you want to go and hide in a cage. I’m going to poke you with a stick until you get out of the cage. You’ll have to find some other solution than hiding, Potter.”

“And what if hiding is what other people want me to do?” Potter whispered, barely loud enough for Zacharias to hear him. “If I have to be their servant and their protector, then shouldn’t I hide?”

“Then they’re stupid,” said Zacharias, and decided that perhaps he could believe in stupid people after all. “If they really do that, if they really want that, then they’re destroying something that could flood their lives with light, too. How moronic would you have to be, to do that?” He looked sideways again, and added, “Well, you could be a moron or you could be Malfoy, who’s worse.”

Malfoy spat at him. Zacharias grinned. It’d been days since he had a good argument.

Hermione was nodding along with him, he saw. He felt a warm flush traveling up his chest that he dismissed as pride. It was good to see that the smartest witch in school could recognize good sense when she saw it.

Malfoy wasn’t able to get his tongue yet, so Zacharias went on speaking to Potter, while locking his eyes with his future opponent. “You’re too needed, Potter. You’re going to have to balance what people want out of you with what other people want out of you, just as some magical creature should already have told you. They’re not Malfoys. They can recognize what you are.”

On the other hand, perhaps none of them were quite as bright as I am.
“And anyway, if they haven’t, I’m telling it to you now,” Zacharias added. “Be a friend, but be a *vates* and a Lord.” He knew that “Lord” wasn’t quite right, but he didn’t know what the equivalent of a *vates* would be for wizards, or even if it had a name. “Stop letting people make a plush dragon out of you.”

He could feel Potter’s breathing growing swifter, his magic surging like the tide. Then Potter stood up and ran out of the room.

Malfoy moved to follow, but Zacharias was already busy tearing into him. “Perhaps I had it the wrong way around, didn’t I, Malfoy? Perhaps he has you on a string. The dragon leading the moron, now there’s a change.”

Of course he had to turn around and answer that. Zacharias grinned, content. He was taking someone who definitely deserved it down a peg or two, Potter had listened to him and might stop acting like a toy, and Hermione was giggling behind her hand at his insults.

All was right with the world.

*******

Harry leaned against the wall and panted for breath. He didn’t know where he was exactly—somewhere on the third floor. He hadn’t bothered to keep track as he ran. His mind was what occupied him, whirling with thoughts and ideas he hadn’t considered before like sparks of light in a broken window.

Oh, he had thought some of them, but somehow, they hadn’t impacted heavily on him. Harry closed his eyes, ran a hand through his hair, and took a deep breath. The glass shards flashed and cut deep.

*I know that Snape and Draco matter, but they can’t matter more than everybody else in the world. Why was I acting as though they did? I never would have, only a few months ago. No, only a month ago. Before Snape got so worried about me that he had to change his behavior, I would never have stood for…*

And a whole bunch of things he would never have stood for stormed through his brain: Draco shoving his friends away, Draco dictating where he spent his time, Snape ordering him around the way he had, Snape humiliating his father.

So why am I standing for it now?

He knew the answer. He’d wanted to make up for his past behavior, the behavior that had made Snape and Draco so worried about him. He’d wanted to show them that he cared and yes, he *could* do what they wanted, be an entirely undemanding ward and friend, not take everything for himself, the way that he had been so far. He’d stumbled so badly in the past that he wanted to make sure he didn’t stumble again.

But he had. He’d swung the balance, and overcorrected it.

Harry grimaced to himself and rubbed at one arm, where he could almost feel the truth making him bleed.

*And I forgot. I forgot what I swore to myself in the Owler when Connor freed my magic from the last of the phoenix web, what I swore to myself when I found out that I could be vates. I have to know myself. I have to know when I’m lying or making mistakes.*

*And this was a lie and mistake, both.*

Harry hung his head for a moment, but already he could feel a stirring impatience inside him. He didn’t want to go on mourning his mistakes. It was time to go about correcting them.

But what can I do? If I just change back again, that won’t do any good, either, because that would deprive Snape and Draco of things they need. And I never want to take them for granted again.

Harry had to consider for only a few moments, though. He’d been put in Slytherin for a reason. And he had done something very similar to what he now planned in the past, when he had concealed certain gifts and tendencies even from Lily.

*I can hide, but not in a cage, the way Zacharias put it—with masks. I can make sure that Snape and Draco still have what they want, what they need. And I can give other people what they want just by acting differently when I’m around them. When something happens to me that they wouldn’t want to know about, I can just not tell them. If Snape and Draco start*
driving into other people’s free wills or interfering with something I need to do as vates, then I can lie.

It was such a simple solution, so breathtaking, that Harry blinked, and wondered why he hadn’t thought of it before.

But he knew the answer even to that one, of course. Because I was so desperate for affection from Snape and Draco. I didn’t want them to abandon me. I thought I had to do this so they wouldn’t.

And that was a mistake. I got along perfectly fine with just a word of approval here and there when I was with Lily. I can do the same thing now.

Harry sucked in air until he could feel his chest bending to hold it all, and then blew it out. He draped his Occlumency shields over his mind again, since he could hear footsteps hastening towards him.

“Harry?” Draco came around the corner, his face wounded. “Why did you abandon me like that?”

“Sorry, Draco,” Harry said softly, and moved forward to hug the other boy. He could feel Draco’s startlement in the stiffening of his shoulders, but he ignored that. Draco needed to be hugged more often. That was something Harry still didn’t do a lot. “I thought you would be angry at me because Zacharias was attacking you through me.”

“No, no,” said Draco, his face radiating happiness. “Let’s just go and work on the potion again, all right? And can you promise me that you won’t listen to Smith anymore? What he said was stupid anyway.”

“Oh course, Draco,” said Harry, the lie coming easily to his lips. He would remember it, and in this state, when he was with Draco and what Draco needed, it was an easy promise to keep.

He could do this. He had a very good memory. And he’d had rather a lot of practice at deception in the last few years. So long as he could give other people what they wanted and needed, there should be no harm in this.

And I’m watching myself now. The moment I see harm—and surely I’ll fail again—I’ll correct myself. This is for the best.

And, soon, I’ll write the letter to Narcissa and make sure Snape doesn’t find out about the way I’m going to reverse the potion against James. He’ll only be angry if he finds out.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: Answers to the Calling

Malfoy Manor
September 22nd, 1994

Dear allies (for so I hope I may call you, though the link we share is Harry Potter and not anything more formal):

I think it is time for another gathering. The Minister has not yet been hooked out of office, for all that he flops like a landed fish. I have had word from a certain friend within the Ministry that the Starrises are growing closer to him, lending him the cloak of their reputation, and they may yet be able to draw him out of trouble. No one has been able to find any grime that stains that cloak of light, and believe me, I have tried.

I am sensitive to the difficulties that attend our travel to and meeting in one place, as well as the friends some of us have who would be most anxious for us to stay at home. To evade their gazes, I suggest we meet in Hogwarts itself, rather than force young Mr. Potter to come to us, on a night when no one would be surprised to see strangers on the grounds. May I suggest Halloween? There were ghosts in the corridors quite often when I was a student there. I suspect we may be both more silent and more dangerous than ever they were.

Awaiting your response,

Lucius Malfoy.

******

Wyvern’s Nest
September 24th, 1994
Dear Lucius:

I find myself both charmed and offended that you would send me a letter you have duplicated with a charm, instead of written out yourself.

I must question when you have sent me this letter. It is true that I have met the boy, but I am hardly part of a circle of allies around him. I have only met him once, and that is not enough time to judge anyone thoroughly, even a powerful wizard. And I did not share the rather tight bond that once connected some of you. Why did you send me this letter? Answer that, and I might consider joining this gathering.

Eagerly awaiting enlightenment,

*Arabella Zabini.*

******

*Malfy Manor*

*September 25th, 1994*

Dear Arabella:

The answers as to why I wished you to attend this gathering are very simple.

You have a son in Slytherin. I think you would know some things about Potter that most people do not, simply from his observations, and those could be used to supplement your own judgment.

 Potter is a powerful Dark wizard. You are a Dark witch. There will not come another such chance—not in our lifetimes, certainly, perhaps not for three hundred years—to change the status of Dark magic so decisively.

I have had the chance to observe Potter closely on several occasions, and I can assure you, he has more qualities than he thinks he does. He will be a leader, but he will require advisers who know more about the world than he does, who know how to wield those qualities when he does not, who can direct all that immense magic towards worthy goals.

Finally, while it is true that you were not part of our merry little band thirteen years ago, it is not only those friends of mine that Potter is drawing in. He will reach many wizards, and many magical creatures, before all is done.

Are you interested?

*Lucius Malfoy.*

******

*Wyvern’s Nest*

*September 27th, 1994*

Dear Lucius:

Indeed, you interest me. And Blaise has just reported something about Potter that interests me immensely. It appears that the future may be more open than I thought it would be. I accept your invitation.

Cordially,

*Arabella Zabini.*

******

*Blackstone*

*September 25th, 1994*

Dear Lucius:
I will certainly be there. I am young Harry’s formal ally, and he will not have such a gathering unless I am in attendance. It would be wrong, and rude, and I am quite certain that Mr. Potter does not mean to be either wrong or rude to me.

Elfrida will be attending as well. It is true that by that time she will be five months pregnant, but she wishes to make a certain request of Potter. After hearing what her request is, I can only agree to it and wish her well in getting him to agree to it. I am certain he will. It would be wrong and rude of him to do otherwise.

Do you know a place in Hogwarts where we might go without everyone coming and gaping at my wife?

Yours in comradeship, under the brand and beyond it,

*Adalrico Bulstrode.*

*******

*Malfroy Manor  
September 28th, 1994*

Dear Adalrico:

Your attendance, as well as Elfrida’s, gladdens my heart. I have received a formal letter from Mr. Potter, and I can assure you that he needs this meeting as much as we do. He has strength, so much of it, but there are unworthy corners that he will shed it into, just as the moon must shine on the intelligent and the discourteous alike. I am going to answer the letter, but not tell him about the meeting yet. I have the impression that it would not be wise to give him much time to object.

The Room of Requirement in Hogwarts will suffice for our meeting, I think.

Yours in comradeship both old and new,

*Lucius Malfroy.*

*******

*The Garden  
September 30th, 1994*

Dear Lucius:

I agree that a formal meeting would be a good idea, though I think you are underestimating Mr. Potter. He could arrange one himself if he wished for one. However, my husband has given his approval to the meeting as well, and most especially to the date, though he will not come with me himself to meet Mr. Potter. He says that it would not be proper.

Tell me, Lucius, because I am interested, and because I am another who once ran with you when we both served our Lord: what do you hope to gain from the boy? I do not think that you care only about having Cornelius gone from office, no matter how he has insulted you. He has served you at other times. Besides, with the political climate the way it is, you know that the majority of the public will only choose another Light-declared Minister, and changes that favor us will come about slowly, if at all.

What is it?

Cordially,

*Hawthorn Parkinson*

*******

*Malfroy Manor  
October 2nd, 1994*

Dear Hawthorn:
In the name of comradeship, and because my Narcissa assures me that you already know anyway, I will tell you. You may have seen the way my son behaves towards Potter. I have witnessed and heard about it now, and I am largely convinced that it is genuine. It may turn or change sometime in the next years, but even then, an alliance with Potter would still be a good idea. I cannot foresee the Minister, or Dumbledore, or even our Lord, lasting long in the world that Potter’s power creates around him every moment of every day.

And, who knows? We may find ourselves facing a much closer alliance than that in a few years, when the boys know their own magic well enough.

We will be meeting in the Room of Requirement in Hogwarts—which reminds me, I must send a letter to Arabella. Excuse me.

Sincerely,

Lucius Malfoy.

******

Dragon’s Eye
October 10th, 1994

Truly, Lucius, I am disappointed in you. I gave you a few weeks to send me an invitation to the gathering of Dark wizards on Halloween to meet young Mr. Potter. And I received nothing. It is not like you to be so discourteous.

Never mind. My eyes have revealed it, as you must have suspected they would. Perhaps your not sending me an invitation is a mark of great respect instead, because you knew that I would spy out the meeting and saw no need to repeat yourself in informing me. I think I shall take it as a sign of that respect, so that I do not need to kill you.

I will see you on Halloween. I am excited. I have not seen you in several years, after all.

Acies Lestrange.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighteen: Never Underestimate a House Elf

Harry stamped his feet and shivered. He had never realized it was so immensely cold in the dungeons at night. Then again, he was usually either under his blankets or in the Slytherin common room in front of a roaring fire.

He wasn’t lingering near Snape’s offices, under cover of a Disillusionment Charm, just waiting for the answer that he hoped would come tonight. He had sent the letter as soon as he thought of the plan. Was Lucius offended, perhaps? Was he not going to reply to the request after all? Was he—

Harry nearly jumped in surprise when he heard the crack of Apparition next to him. He looked around hastily, and saw Dobby standing calmly next to him. The house elf gave him a nod, apparently easily able to see through the Disillusionment Charm.

“Dobby is here to help Harry Potter,” he said, and then handed over two letters, both of which bore his name. Harry recognized the handwriting on one as Narcissa’s, and opened that one first, since he already knew what Lucius’s would say.

Dear Harry:

I am indeed concerned about Regulus, and saddened that my stubborn cousin did not lower the wards before he vanished or died (we must face the possibility that he is now dead). I would be happy to meet you at No. 12 Grimmauld Place, though I cannot promise you that we will be able to get inside. The wards I encountered when I last tried to visit were immensely strong, as they are when protecting the true heir of the family. But if you wish to meet me there and try to enter, I would welcome the chance. Perhaps in a few weekends? I am dancing until then.

Narcissa Malfoy.
Harry relaxed with a small sigh. At least he would be doing something that might possibly help Regulus, though he wasn’t sure, based on Narcissa’s description of the wards, that it would manage to actually help.

He opened Lucius’s letter then, while Dobby waited patiently, looking around as though he found the dungeon corridor fascinating.

**Dear Mr. Potter:**

*I will not even pretend to understand why you wish to borrow my house elf for the evening. But your favor is granted, as your autumnal equinox gift from me. Keep in mind that there is one step in the dance left, and one only. I already know which gift I most hope to receive at Midwinter.*

*Lucius Malfoy.*

Harry rolled his eyes and folded the letter. _Arrogant as always, Lucius. I think that’s his natural state of being._ He looked at Dobby. “Dobby, do you want to be here and help me?” he asked. Never mind that the truce-dance had compelled him to approach Lucius formally to ask for the house elf’s help; he would do nothing that went against Dobby’s natural will and inclinations.

“Dobby wants to be here and helping,” said Dobby calmly. “Dobby read the letter that Mr. Harry sent to Master Malfoy.” He leaned forward and regarded Harry with that stern force that Harry was always surprised could hide in the eyes of a house elf. “This service that he wishes for Dobby’s help on sounds dangerous. Dobby will protect Harry Potter.”

Harry coughed, embarrassed. “I hope it’s not going to be dangerous, Dobby,” he said. “We shouldn’t meet anyone in there.”

“In where, Harry Potter?” Dobby let his eyes widen for the first time, making him look more like a typical house elf. “Is Dobby going into a dragon’s lair in the Forbidden Forest?”

“No—”

“Is Dobby hunting unicorns for their blood?”

“No—“

“Is Dobby—“ Dobby took a deep breath and lowered his voice. “Is Dobby going into the Slytherin rooms to find Master Draco’s trousers?”

Harry gave Dobby an odd look. Sometimes he felt as if everyone else understood something immense and shifting around him that he did not. There were remarks he was sure would make sense, if just seen in a context that he didn’t know how to view. “No, Dobby,” he said. “We’re sneaking into Professor Snape’s office to retrieve some notes on a potion. I don’t think he should be in there, since he went to bed early tonight.” Harry told himself that he did not feel guilty about the very mild sleeping draught he’d put in Snape’s goblet during their last few training sessions. It had to be mild, or Snape would have sensed it, and would probably be immune to it. All it really did was make Snape yawn and bed sound delicious to him. He had stayed up late at least once, brewing in his lab and making Harry ache in agony in case Dobby came that night. “Just a quick trip in and out, but I need you with me in case I encounter any magic I can’t deal with.” And he thought he might. He knew something about the Dark spells that Snape used to defend his lab, but not all of them.

“Why is Harry Potter sneaking into Professor Snape’s lab?” Dobby whispered. “Dobby thought that Professor Snape was Harry Potter’s friend.”

Harry hesitated. What Dobby said had been true, and still was true—up to a point. In a certain mindset. When Harry was near Snape and draped himself with Occlumency shields to hide his inappropriate emotions towards his guardian, then he could believe that what Snape was doing was good and right. When he was away, and let the emotions break through, he knew that he had to do something to help James, and if that meant stealing the potion notes from Snape’s lab, then that was what he would do.

Besides, the only other option would have been using Legimimency on Snape and finding his memory of brewing the potion. Harry did not want to force his will on his guardian, and he suspected he couldn’t do it without being caught, anyway. And Snape’s wrath would be terrible to behold if he caught Harry trying to read his mind. Despite the risks of the spells Snape might have on his lab, this was still safer.
“He is my friend,” said Harry, deciding on the truth. “But he did something I think is bad. Um, sometimes I think it’s bad. Maybe.” He didn’t know if he could accurately describe the state of his mind to anyone anymore, even to himself. He’d become so good at ducking in and out of his shields, making himself into a different person around different people—calm or agitated or active or passive as needed—in just a few days that he sometimes felt as if he were made of masks. He just needed to open a box and pick out the appropriate one, and he would be ready to face whoever required his help at the moment.

“Dobby understands,” said Dobby, with a small bow. “Master Malfoy often does things that Dobby thinks is bad, but Dobby still obeys.”

Harry blinked, then decided that he should be honored to be compared to a house elf, not angered, and headed towards the door to Snape’s office. “Come on,” he whispered, and extended one hand. “Acclaro.”

The lines of spells and wards sprang into being around the office door. Harry grimaced. Given Snape’s skill in potions, he couldn’t even be sure that this was all of the protections. He cocked his head and studied the ones that he recognized, including the leafy green of a Repelling Spell under the thick blue lines of a spell that would preserve an image of anyone who walked through the door when Snape wasn’t there.

He could dispel most of the magic, but for all he knew, that might trip alarms in Snape’s mind that would break through the fragile barrier of the sleeping potion.

Then he paused, remembering a description of a spell he’d read about in a history of the First War. For a long time, the Aurors hadn’t been able to figure out how the Death Eaters were escaping their traps. Then they realized that the Death Eaters were able to exile the effects of all their spells from a certain, small area, and Apparate or touch a Portkey just inside that area. The spell was fragile and would collapse the moment the Death Eater was gone, but in the meantime it would banish the magic and—this was the part that had interested Harry—not alert any Aurors that their spells were being disrupted.

He only needed the spell to last long enough to let him step through a door.

“Finite Incantatem Glomero!”

The magic surged through him, an unfamiliar thrill, the way it always was when he tried a spell for the first time, and then a sphere of expanding air opened around his hand and pushed steadily outward. Harry was already sweating with the effort of holding it. Of course, he’d never done this before, and he’d done it wandless, besides. *I really ought to have used my wand,* he thought, as he watched the wards and spells on the door disappear one by one.

At last the sphere was as big as the door, and Harry stepped through, with Dobby close on his heels. The door swung shut behind them, and Harry released the sphere with a hiss. He remembered hazily that it had been harder for the Death Eaters to raise the spell when the Aurors trying to confine them were strong wizards. The sheer power and age of the spells on Snape’s door probably had something to do with his inability to maintain the sphere.

Dobby tapped him on the shoulder. Harry jumped and looked back.

Dobby regarded him carefully. “In future,” he squeaked, “Dobby will be happy to Apparate Harry Potter past the door.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. *I didn’t even think of asking him.* ‘Thank you, Dobby,’” he said, as he turned to study the Potions lab. “I hope that we should only have to do this once, though.”

The only light in the lab was a candle floating on top of a potion in a cauldron behind Snape’s desk, which had been burning for days now. Harry knew better than to touch it. He was surprised how empty the room seemed, how dusty, how dead, without Snape to give it a spark of warmth and life. He shook his head to unsettle the lingering impression and moved towards Snape’s desk.

Dobby trailed behind him. “What is Harry Potter looking for?”

“Any handwritten notes with the name of a potion at the top,” Harry said, studying the locked drawer at the top of the desk. The locking spell was a simple one, and he wondered why, until he saw the wicked-looking needle that would have pierced his fingers if he’d used his hand to it. He shook his head. *Snape really is paranoid.* “Or anything that says James Potter.”

Dobby nodded, and whisked away to the other side of the room. Harry could hear faint squeaks and pops, and assumed he
was using house elf magic to search. He didn’t bother to look over. He trusted Dobby completely.

He rifled through a few half-scribbled sheets of parchment that weren’t anything like complete Potions recipes, and then paused. The nearest sheet had flickered, as if the words written on it were only a glamour, and a cover for what was really there. Harry flipped back to it and narrowed his eyes.

*The Meleager Potion.*

Harry lifted the notes out, and whispered, “*Aspectus Lyncis,*” when he realized the words wouldn’t stop flickering in front of his eyes. That stripped the glamour from the parchment, and the words calmed and let him read them.

*A potion to imitate and reverse the fate of Meleager. We all live as long as candleflames, in truth, compared to the mountains and the rivers.*

Harry knew the legend of Meleager, whose life had been tied to a burning brand, and who had died when his mother threw the brand into the fire in grief over Meleager’s killing of her brothers, his uncles. He could imagine what a potion tied to that legend would do, though of course Snape was not stupid enough to actually write that out in the notes. He found his head turning, little by little, to stare at the potion on which the candle-flame floated.

He walked slowly towards it and bent his head, sniffing. When he realized that he could smell chocolate, and that he had a deep desire to taste the potion, he leaned back and closed his eyes, fighting down several emotions.

The potion smelled, and looked, like the one that Fudge had licked off his fingers when Snape and Harry visited the Ministry. Whether Snape had created the Meleager Potion with just Fudge in mind, Harry didn’t know. He also didn’t know whether Fudge would die for certain when the candle was doused.

He did know that it sounded like it, and all he could feel was a sick wonder at the back of his mind. Would Snape really kill the Minister, in such a way that no one else would probably be able to trace it back to him? Surely, if he was tested for the potion, no one else would recognize it, since it was an entirely new creation. Snape might even have made it out of ingredients that would go inert when their work was complete, a tactic he had told Harry about in their summer potions theory discussions. That would prevent anyone from finding anything suspicious when they examined Fudge’s body.

Harry checked the parchment in his hand. Yes, the Meleager Potion included several of those ingredients.

He found his hands shaking, his breath rushing, his heart pounding hard enough in his ears to make his vision blur. Snape could only have wanted to kill the Minister because he was angry at him over Harry’s abduction and trying to return custody to James. There was no other reason. So far as Harry knew, before this summer, Snape had completely and utterly ignored the Minister’s existence. Perhaps he might have felt some grudge from the days when he was arrested and denounced as a Death Eater, but Harry doubted that. The timing of this revenge would have been too coincidental.

*He was going to kill someone. Not in battle, not because I asked him to, but because he wanted to, for what he sees as wrongs done to me.*

It was intolerable. There were some things that went too far, particularly when he was out from under the Occlumency shields. Harry might have been able to understand Snape brewing a potion like this for a personal enemy; the man who had that many spells and wards on the door to his potions lab was perfectly capable of coming up with the idea, even if he never used it. But he would have killed someone in Harry’s name, in a way that would make Harry indirectly responsible for it.

Harry could not bear it. No matter how much he didn’t want to make Snape angry, no matter how much he loved his guardian, there were some things that he couldn’t bear.

He opened his eyes and surveyed the Meleager Potion bleakly. Of course, part of the problem was that he didn’t know what might happen if he disturbed it. If he put out the candle at all, Fudge might die, or at least burn. Or perhaps Snape intended to blackmail the Minister, and would only snuff the candle if Fudge did not do as he wanted.

Or perhaps the potion was actually primed to do something else, and Harry would set it off if he touched it, because he had an imperfect understanding of how its name was tied to its nature.

He was sure of only one thing: he could not leave the potion in Snape’s care, no matter what deception he had to come up with to conceal that he had been the one to take it. He could not bear it if Fudge died after he knew about the potion.
He extended his hand, and his will, and his magic swept forward and delicately levitated the entire cauldron into the air, keeping the floating candle alight. Harry breathed a sigh of relief when no wards screamed at him. He knew that Snape often didn’t use wards around his actual cauldrons, for fear of the magic interacting with the potion’s ingredients, but if any brew would have been the exception, it was this one.

“Master Harry.”

Harry controlled his flinch with a stern command to every muscle in his body, and didn’t let the cauldron of Meleager Potion fall. He turned and smiled at Dobby. “Yes, Dobby?”

“Dobby has found a paper with James Potter on it,” said Dobby, waving a sheaf of papers, and held it so that Harry could read it.

Harry let out a breath when he saw the name of his father scrawled at the top of the parchment, deep enough to half-tear it, and the list of ingredients below. At least some of them were ones he had suspected must be in the potion, to make his father act like he had. And, though Snape did not say so, the antidote would also be fairly simple to make. This potion was delicate and complicated and designed to evade notice and attention. Its antidote would be brute strength, a potion designed to smash at and tear away and counteract those complex, fine chains of magic.

Of course, there was the problem of brewing the antidote, and of making sure that Snape did not blame him for taking the notes for James’s potion and the Meleager Potion.

Harry hesitated for only a few moments before the answer came to him. He smiled slowly.

“Thank you, Dobby,” he said. “You’ve been an immense help. You can go back to Malfoy Manor now, if you like.”

Dobby regarded him calmly, and didn’t move. “Harry Potter will need help brewing the potion?”

Harry blinked. “Yes, of course, I’d like some. But I didn’t know if you would want to stay and aid me.”

Dobby reached up, and very gently, tapped him on the side of the head with a long finger. Harry blinked again.

“Harry Potter should ask for help more often,” said Dobby, and reached out and gripped his arm. “Where does Harry Potter want to brew the potion?”

Harry’s mind fixed on the image of the abandoned classroom where he’d been trying to teach Connor and the others, but he knew that he needed to go back to the Slytherin rooms first, to fetch his cauldron and the ingredients he would need. He told Dobby so, and felt the house elf Apparate him, the odd feeling as though he were being squeezed out of the world and then fitted back in. To his relief, when he looked around his room, the cauldron of Meleager Potion had come with them.

Harry trotted to his trunk and drew out his cauldron, his wand, a pouch of crushed violet petals, a small vial of dragon’s blood, a pinch of demiguise hair, and a few other things that would counteract the more volatile ingredients in the potion that Snape had fed James. It really was a marvelous creation, but marvelous creations could be still be undone by the simplest means.

He found himself shaking his head, though, instead of letting Dobby Apparate him and the ingredients again. He made his way to Draco’s bed and drew back the curtains, watching as Draco slept.

His sleep seemed to be more restless these days, Harry thought, watching him, but also more satisfied. Draco usually had no expression when he slept. Now he often smiled, and murmured what sounded like the names of potion ingredients as he twitched around in search of a comfortable position. He had his head dug into the pillow now, strands of blond hair scattered in several directions, his breathy mutter not loud enough to make out.

If Snape is going too far, does that mean that Draco also is?

Harry half-closed his eyes. Draco still hadn’t told him what the purpose of the potion and his research on Julia Malfoy was, and wouldn’t let him read the book, but Harry thought he should know more about it as the time to make it drew on. If Draco was going to use the potion to hurt someone else…

Harry wouldn’t let him.
Harry sighed and let the curtain fall shut again. It was so much easier defying his guardian and his best friend when they weren’t awake, he thought.

He nodded to Dobby.

“Can you take me and all of this to the second classroom from the top of the stairs on the seventh floor?” he asked.

Dobby bowed, ears flapping, grabbed his hand, and Apparated them all again.

******

“Harry Potter must wake up.”

Harry lifted his head with a start. He truly hadn’t meant to fall asleep. In fact, the last thing he could remember was counting down the clockwise turns of the spoon in the cauldron, watching as the potion swelled and brightened towards what should be an off-white color, if the notes on the original potion were correct.

“Did I finish—” Harry asked, lifting his head off the table and whipping at his hair. A few specks of dust drifted out, but the classroom hadn’t had enough time to get truly dirty since he was last here.

“Yes, Harry Potter sir,” said Dobby, and nodded to something behind him. Harry turned around, and then let his breath out with a small sigh. His own cauldron was full of the off-white potion that should neutralize, one by one, the ingredients playing havoc with James’s mind and body right now.

The Meleager Potion cauldron sat in a corner of the classroom, still full of its glittering liquid and floating candle. Harry shook his head at it helplessly. He had no idea what to do with the thing, except keep it safe. Any motion might be the one that would burn Fudge, or kill him, or, knowing Snape, tear all his limbs off.

Harry carefully used a cleaning spell on the vial that had held the dragon’s blood, then slid the new off-white potion into it. He hesitated, then, looking at Dobby. He hardly needed help to go to the Owlery and send the potion to Remus for James, but there was something else he wanted to ask Dobby about.

The house elf gazed back at him, eyes large and solemn and gleaming.

I can’t, Harry thought. He’s done more than enough already, helping me search Snape’s rooms and get here and brew the potion.

“Thank you, Dobby,” he whispered. “I don’t know what I’d have done without you. I hope that you have a safe journey home.” Of course, if anything could stop a house elf from Apparating, he didn’t know what it was, but the wish seemed appropriate. He started to turn and walk out of the classroom.

Dobby’s hand caught his wrist. Harry turned and looked down.

“Harry Potter can at least ask,” said Dobby. “Dobby knows he will not order.”

Harry felt himself flush. Are my facial expressions that obvious? Or is it only because I’m with someone I feel I don’t have to lie to? “I—Dobby, you’re under no obligation at all—”

“Dobby prefers to freely offer his help,” said Dobby, with a small stamp of his foot. “And if anything Harry Potter asks can help him along the path to becoming vates, then Dobby will do it.”

Well, I should arrange that, too. Harry decided it might not be so bad if he linked what he wanted to ask Dobby to do with a conscious stride towards becoming vates.

“If you would seal this room so that no one can get in and touch the Meleager Potion,” he whispered, “I’d be grateful. I’d also like to arrange—a delegation, a meeting, something, with magical creatures who are interested in talking about a vates. I’ve only broken one web so far. I think it’s time that I should break more.”

Dobby’s smile could have lit suns. He raised one hand, and a soft ball of flames popped into being above them, quickly revealing itself as Fawkes. Fawkes uttered a chatter that Harry presumed was irritation at being summoned so abruptly, but then loosed a long trill as some signal Harry couldn’t make out seemed to pass between phoenix and house elf.
“Fawkes has been waiting for Harry Potter to make up his mind on this,” Dobby said. “Fawkes will go at once and tell the creatures of the Forest who will want to know that a vates wishes to meet with them.”

Harry felt his face flush again. He had actually intended to ask Fawkes for help with something else, and now—

Fawkes uttered a sound that began as a trill but expanded into a warble in the middle. Dobby chuckled again, and shook his head at Harry. “Fawkes says you is to stop thinking so much, Harry Potter,” he said. “Whatever you need, if it is not evil, you may at least ask Fawkes instead of brooding about it.”

Harry nodded, took a deep breath, and faced the phoenix. “I want Snape to think that the Meleager Potion is utterly destroyed, even though the Minister isn’t going to suffer from it. This is what I’d like you to do. I can’t have you do it in reality, because I don’t know what would happen to the potion then, but you can persuade Snape that you did it if…”

Fawkes listened to the whole plan with evident approval; Dobby didn’t bother translating any of his increasingly enthusiastic chirps, until the last. “Fawkes has been wondering when Harry Potter would wake up to the damage the Potions Master was doing,” said Dobby, with a slightly stern look.

Harry bowed his head. Waves of heat and cold were threatening to assault him again as he thought about what Snape might have done with that potion, and how he would be responsible for it. But he had to get through that, and do what was necessary. Merlin knew he would brood over what he had done right and what he had done wrong enough later. He was already coming to think that his latest plan of lying to everyone wasn’t working, not if two magical creatures could see in a few glances that he so obviously needed help.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I—I’ll do something about him. I don’t know what yet, but I will.”

Fawkes landed briefly on his shoulder, making Harry stagger under the weight, and pushed his head against his cheek with a croon. Then he rose and spread his wings, vanishing in a ball of flame that Harry knew would take him to Snape’s office, and then to the Forbidden Forest.

“Dobby will seal this room,” said the house elf, his hand gripping Harry’s wrist once more. “Harry Potter need not worry.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” Harry whispered, and ran for the Owlery. He had only a short time till dawn, he thought, and he wanted to send the potion on its way to Remus and be in his bed before then.

He checked his hair and his robes for flecks of dust and potion ingredients as he ran. It was absolutely essential that no one know what he was doing.

His mind returned to the concerns Fawkes and Dobby had.

At least, not yet.

*******

Snape opened the door to his potions lab, and was greeted with the smell of fire.

His first thought was that the Meleager Potion had somehow tipped over, and the candle had set fire to other things in the office. But when he looked, he found a very familiar phoenix instead, sitting amid a pile of ashes where the cauldron had been and grooming itself casually.

“What is this?”

Snape had never heard his own voice so cold. He could feel a small amount of shock trying to surface; he knew what Fawkes must have done, and he had an inkling as to why. But he shoved the thought away. He had done what was necessary to keep Harry absolutely safe. He would not burst out into rages anymore if he did this, and Harry’s mind had been calm and brisk and efficient for as long as Snape had been existing on the icy level of his mind. He knew he was doing the right thing.

Fawkes raised his head and began to sing.

Snape’s mother had told him no defense that could allow him to hold the ice against a phoenix’s song. He found himself sitting on the floor with no notion of how he got there, his arms crossed over his head as though mere flesh could stand up to
music that would conquer and destroy utter evil. The song washed over him, and dragged his emotions, the ones he’d been unwilling to acknowledge since he went cold—that is, everything except the icy rage—into the light.

He saw, as if in a dream, Fawkes flicking into being over the cauldron that held the Meleager Potion, alighting on it, and destroying it with flames of red and gold and blue. The phoenix, of course, being a creature of pure Light and fire, could absorb the candle flame without putting it out, and thus without hurting the person who had already ingested it. Then the phoenix had moved to his desk, and Snape’s notes on that potion and the one for Potter, too, were burned and gone.

The potion was evil. What Snape had intended was evil, stepping beyond the bounds of guarding a child whom he wanted to protect. Fawkes, an independent creature of Light who had left his former master when that master grew too Dark for him, would not stand for it.

The whole vision remained hazy and surreal, as though it hadn’t really happened, or as though Snape weren’t understanding the full import of what the bird wanted to convey to him. But there could be no doubt of Fawkes’s disapproval, which overflowed from every stern, loving note.

Snape found himself caught in the storm of emotions he was unprepared to deal with. He tried to fight them back, but so long as the phoenix was singing, he could not. He knelt there, panting, and at least refusing to weep.

A heavy, warm weight on his shoulder nearly unbalanced him. He dropped his arms and looked into the phoenix’s dark eyes.

Fawkes pecked him, a swift, scorching motion that left a tiny bit of burned flesh on his cheek. Then he spread his wings, lifted into the air, and flicked out of existence in a ball of flames.

Snape knelt there, and closed his eyes, and breathed hard in the silence that seemed wrenching after all that music.

He felt sorrow swirl through him, and regret, and the panic that had been so familiar after the Death Eater attacks during the summer. He felt as he had when Harry had nearly died from the Blood-Boiling Curse, and he cursed, soft and low and steady, under his breath, as he might have then.

His carefully built refuge was destroyed. He did not know if he could go back to being cold.

But he knew he would have to try, because there was no other way to move forward now. The Meleager Potion was gone, but the danger from the Minister to Harry remained. He had to find some way to fight that, or leave himself helpless.

And Snape hated feeling helpless.

He climbed to his feet and went to fetch a bit of Floo powder and firecall the Headmaster. He would tell Dumbledore that he was not feeling well today, and would not teach his classes. It was only the second time he had ever asked for such an indulgence. He was sure Albus would grant it to him after seeing his face.

One day. That is all you have. You must become what you were again, or you fail Harry and you fail yourself.

If only the damn, dim remnant of the phoenix song would stop echoing in the room, and the sensation that he was making a mistake would stop echoing in his brain.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Nineteen: Delegation

“Attention, students. Can I have your attention, if you please?”

Harry lifted his head, reluctantly, from the history book he’d been discussing with Draco. Draco had been insisting that one particular unspecified incident of a witch showing up to rescue a bunch of captured pureblood children from Muggles who wanted to burn them sounded a lot like Julia Malfoy. Harry had been trying to point out that Julia Malfoy would have been about twelve years old at the time, but he didn’t think he was having a lot of success. That might have been because he kept breaking off the discussion to eat his dinner, while Draco prattled on, but he thought it had more to do with his friend’s innate stubbornness.

Dumbledore stood behind the high table, smiling, one hand extended as if he were going to hex everyone in sight. Harry found himself tensing up, involuntarily. He shook his head at himself and sat back, arms folded over his chest. **He’s not**
going to hex everyone. You don’t cast just dueling spells with your hand held like that. Calm down, Harry. Snape’s training is rubbing off on you in all the wrong ways.

“I know that many of you have been wondering why Quidditch has been canceled this year,” said Dumbledore, chuckling as shouts came back to him from the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables. “It was canceled to give Hogwarts the opportunity to concentrate its attention on another event instead. How many people here have ever heard of the Triwizard Tournament?”

Harry frowned. He vaguely remembered reading a reference to it, once, but he didn’t think—

A flow of chatter from around him told him that many other people had heard of it. Harry resolved to pay more attention in the future. There was always something he didn’t know about, and any part of it could hurt Connor or someone else he cared for.

“The Triwizard Tournament,” Dumbledore went on grandly, apparently open to explaining for those who didn’t know, “is a great contest held between three of the European wizarding schools—Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. Three champions, one from each school, compete with each other for a prize and honor and glory for their school. Once it was held much more often than is the case now, not only for the sake of the champions and the students, but to strengthen the bonds in the wizarding community. However, the tasks proved too dangerous, often killing the champions, and the tradition was discontinued.” Dumbledore paused, and Harry could almost see his eyes glowing from where he sat. “But now the tradition has been revived! Students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons will journey to Hogwarts on Halloween, and a few days after that, the champions will be chosen!”

A murmur of excitement began to run round the Great Hall. From the Gryffindor table, someone bold enough to draw the Headmaster’s attention shouted out, “How will the champions be chosen, Headmaster?”

“By means of the Goblet of Fire,” said Dumbledore, with calm cheer. “This will select among the names of many potential champions from each school in order to narrow down the most worthy students to compete. The students will need to be clever, of course, good wizards, and honorable. The Goblet will doubtless decide on the basis of other qualities as well.”

Harry shook his head as he listened to the murmurs. Everyone around him seemed simultaneously convinced that he or she might be a champion and convinced that the Goblet might not pick him or her.

“Who cares?” he mouthed to Draco, who’d only just looked up from his book. “It’s just some stupid competition anyway. And who would really want to face basilisks or whatever else they have to face?”

“It probably won’t be a basilisk,” said Draco, and wrinkled his nose at him as if Harry should have known that. “Now, what do you think of this one? ‘A lovely silver-haired woman was sometimes seen walking the hills of Wiltshire in early spring, her eyes closed as if she were dreaming.’”

“Lots of Malfoys must have been silver-haired…”

Harry let himself be drawn into the argument. It was easier than trying to figure out why Dumbledore was watching him with shining eyes from the head table.

*******

“Master Harry! Wake up, Master Harry!”

Harry blinked the haze from his eyes and fumbled for his glasses. When he drew open the curtains of his bed, Dobby was waiting for him, leaping from foot to foot. Fawkes hovered above his head. Harry glanced around swiftly, but other than a grumble from Blaise, there was no sign that the house elf and the phoenix had awakened any of the other boys. Harry felt a rush of relief.

“What is it, Dobby?” he whispered.

“Fawkes has done as he said he would,” Dobby whispered back insistently. “Harry Potter is to come to the Forbidden Forest and meet with the magical creatures who want to meet the vates.”

Harry took a deep breath, and felt his heart speed up until he could literally feel it shaking his chest. But he didn’t think of refusing. How could he have, when Dobby and Fawkes had helped him so much the other night?
“I’m coming,” he said, and then glanced down at his pyjamas. “Do they want, um, some more formal attire than this?”

Fawkes gave an impatient trill, and Dobby translated without waiting for Harry to ask. “Many of the magical creatures in the Forest go naked all the time, Master Harry. Master Harry is to come on.”

Harry shrugged. He supposed he should enjoy the chance to attend a meeting in pyjamas while he had it. It wasn’t as though most of his wizard allies would have accepted such a thing.

He grabbed his wand, made sure his glasses were settled firmly on his face, and let Dobby take his hand. This time, the experience of house elf Apparition wasn’t so strange, and he could even stand on his own feet, take a deep breath, and look around when he was finished. They were, once again, in that clearing in the Forbidden Forest where the centaurs had tried Draco his first year. There was the familiar hill, the rocks that had formed an impromptu gallows standing on top of it.

This time, though, he was in the exact center of the clearing, with Dobby still holding the wrist. Fawkes puffed into being above him, and let him see that many magical creatures waited around the edges of the place, studying him. Harry lifted his chin and let his eyes meet their gazes, one by one. It was much easier than looking down or shuffling, much easier than he’d had any right to expect, he thought. At least he knew this kind of dancing, or path-walking, the way that Dobby and Fawkes had once referred to it, was difficult. It was not full of human complexities that would turn on him, the way it seemed his relationships with his guardian and best friend had lately.

A contingent of centaurs stood directly in front of him, on the level ground, their arms folded across their chests. They began stamping their left front hooves when they saw him, a sound as low and regular as a heartbeat, but considerably more unnerving. Harry nodded to the two of them he recognized, Firenze and Coran, who had tried Draco in that strange way, and then turned to his left, glancing at the hill.

It was alive with small, lithe bodies. Fawkes’s flames gave him glimpses of gold and green and other brilliant colors. The Many were there, then, and multiple-headed snakes that Harry was sure were Runespoors. Some of them had three heads, some only two. Two of the heads would often combine and bite off a third, if Harry remembered his studies correctly. He found himself relieved that he would be able to speak with at least some of the attendees without needing Dobby to translate.

He continued turning, until he could face the edge of the clearing that had been directly behind him when he arrived. He felt his breath catch, tears forming in his eyes.

Unicorns stood behind him, shining silvery in the darkness, their heavy snowfall-like manes and their gleaming horns so beautiful that Harry had to suppress the urge to go nearer and touch them. He settled for inclining his head. He had never seen so many unicorns all together in one place, nor expected to see them. He forbade himself to actually shed the tears he wanted to. This was a formal meeting, and he was a wizard, even if was a vates—in truth, a representative not of these creatures, but of the species that had bound the others. He did not have the right to ask them to indulge any weakness he might have.

He turned back to face the centaurs. As if that had been a signal, their hooves stopped drumming, and Firenze stepped forth from among the others, his face calm.

“Harry Potter,” he said. “We have met once before. We came tonight because you have proven your worth to us in formal testing. And because your fate is linked to Mars, and he grows steadily in the skies.”

Harry couldn’t help stiffening a bit. It was an odd first statement from the centaurs, when he had expected them to speak about the webs that bound them.

“There is a prophecy, that is true,” he said. “But the prophecy is not clear about the way in which I am implicated in the war.”

“The stars are always clear, shining beyond cloud and storm.” Firenze looked unmoved. “They are the only statement we need. You are in the war, but you are also our vates. We would not see you die before you have fulfilled your service to our kind.”

Harry frowned, but nodded slightly. I can hardly blame them for that. “There is a problem with haste,” he warned them. “I don’t know the webs very well yet. If I unbind them too fast, then I might do you as much harm as good.”

Firenze’s face was calm and blank. “We do not understand you, Harry Potter.”

Harry rubbed his forehead. His scar seemed to tingle and burn, though that was probably only because he’d been dreaming
about Voldemort before he woke up. “I thought you meant that you wanted me to unbind you now, or at any rate as soon as possible, before I die in this war.”

“A vates cannot be hurried,” said Firenze, with something like shock in his tone. At least, Harry thought it might have been shock if the centaurs in general weren’t so subdued. “He must always be becoming. You must walk the path between the thorns and make your decisions in the right place, without anyone hurrying or urging you on. We agreed to come to this meeting to let you know that we know of the war, of Mars’s shining. Though not everyone has agreed—“ his gaze went past the centaurs behind him and further into the Forest, as if to indicate people who were not there “—we believe that we must help you survive, so that you can continue this process of becoming.”

Harry shuddered a bit. “What kind of help were you thinking of giving?” No need to panic, yet, no need to panic.

Firenze’s gaze came back to him, calm and nearly blank again. “You have heard of what centaurs can do in the past.”

“I thought those were only legends,” Harry whispered. Certainly the last story of centaurs actually helping wizards, rather than simply trying to live apart from them, was a thousand years old. Then a small group of twenty centaurs, joined to a smaller group of wizards, had devastated a group of wizards four times their size. In battle, they were ferocious.

“They are not,” said Firenze. “We have not gone to war in a long time, Harry Potter. We are prepared to change that, for your sake and for our own. We are allowed to harm wizards if we are fighting in defense of one of them. A hole in the net.” He might have sounded ironic—at least, he should have if he were human—but instead, he went on regarding Harry as if he hadn’t said anything at all sickening or horrifying. “We offer you our aid in battle, in return for our freedom.”

“You don’t need to do that,” said Harry, thinking of all the ways in which he was not a general. He didn’t know the first thing about pure battle tactics or strategy. His mother had always trained him to fight alone. His first goal had always been defensive, to protect Connor. Even with the Dark Arts spells Snape was teaching him, Harry had no idea how to arrange soldiers, how to best an army on a battlefield. The thought of doing so made him sick. “I might lose you the war and your freedom and your lives, all three, if you put your fates in my hands.”

“Nevertheless,” said Firenze, “we have decided it is to our advantage to do this, and so it will be done.”

Harry hesitated, wondering if he could ask the centaurs to fight under someone else, and then shook his head. The only person he knew for certain could arrange soldiers and, in so doing, win battles, was Dumbledore, and he would not trust the Headmaster not to put the centaurs back under their web again. “I am no strategist, no tactician,” he said, deciding that he might as well reveal why he was so reluctant. “I might lose you the war and your freedom and your lives, all three, if you put your fates in my hands.”

“We will teach you,” said Firenze, his voice implacable. “We ask only for a commitment from you, vates, and that you may give us by answering five questions for us.”

Harry swallowed. “Very well.”

“Why do you want to become vates?” Firenze might have been Professor Vector, questioning Harry on his Arithmancy problems. Harry found it easier to answer when he thought of this that way, as a test in abstract knowledge, rather than something that might determine the future course of his and other people’s lives.

“To spread freedom,” said Harry. “And out of some guilt, because I did not know about the webs and was horrified when I did learn about them. And because I lived under a web myself, and I would like to prevent that from happening to anyone else.” He knew the answers were all honest.

“When do you believe your work as vates will end?”

Harry blinked and hesitated, caught off-guard. “I do not know if it ever will,” he said at last. “I do not know how many webs there are to undo, how many compulsions to break, or at least try to break. Perhaps I might spend years negotiating just to make sure that house elf webs can be removed, for example. I expect that will be my hardest task.” Then he thought of the northern goblins, with their webs bound to linchpins, and shivered. Perhaps not. “It might take me until the end of my life, or it might last longer than I am able to live. Or perhaps I will die in the war and it will never end, then. I simply cannot know.”

Firenze nodded, with no sign on his face of whether that answer had been right or wrong. “What do you believe would happen to the magical creatures if Voldemort returned to power?”
Harry shook his head. “I think he would enslave some of you, the way he does humans, and perhaps set free those ones who could help him. Others he would probably kill.” He could not prevent himself from looking at the unicorns over his shoulder. “Or at least only keep them alive for what they could be useful for.”

The unicorns watched him. An incredibly intense vision came to Harry, of a night-covered farm where unicorns huddled in pens, milked for their blood and deprived of their horns. He gagged, and felt a shiver in his belly that made him come perilously near to losing his dinner. He swallowed, and managed to fix his gaze on Firenze again.

“What do you believe will happen if this war ends and the Light side remains in power, untroubled?”

“The continuation of the webs,” said Harry. “Dumbledore is committed to keeping things the way they are, with no major changes. He could not be vates, and I doubt he would become one at this point in his life, or want to. He told me that he would have to sacrifice his magic to become vates. I don’t think he wants to do that.”

Firenze showed no reaction on his face, but did say, “If you sacrifice your magic, you cannot be vates. Only a vates has the strength to break the webs.”

_I wonder if Dumbledore knows that._ Harry shoved the thought away, because it made him uneasy. He knew that Dumbledore was worried about him and his power, but he did not like to think that that extended to actively working against him. They had a truce, after all, and doing this would violate it. “I understand,” he said.

“And the fifth and last question, Harry Potter.” Firenze’s voice became deep and rumbling. Behind him, the centaurs began stamping their hooves again, the drum-like sound mingling well with the tones of his voice. “If it came down to a decision between saving a portion of your own people and freeing a species of magical creature, which would you choose?”

“Which wizards are we talking about, and which species of magical creature?” Harry demanded.

The drumming ended with a full-on, mighty crash as all the centaurs reared and brought both front hooves down together. Harry started, and wondered if that meant he had answered the question incorrectly and the centaurs were about to charge and destroy him.

“We renew our commitment,” said Firenze, his face perfectly serene. “We will follow Harry Potter into war, when he fights his battles. We know that he will be vates, or become one from moment to moment.” He turned and cantered back to his herd, not looking back at Harry once, though he did say, “Welcome to our hearts, child of Mars, as no wizard has been welcome in centuries.”

Harry just shook his head and waited. That seemed to be the end of the ritual with the centaurs, however, so he turned and looked in the direction of the Many and the Runespoors writhing on their hill.

“Greetings,” he said, holding a snake in his sight, so that he knew he was speaking Parseltongue. “What can I do for my legless siblings?”

The mingled hissing of the Many came back to him, flowing and ebbing, restless as a tide. “There are many bindings here. We do not like it. The Forest provides a home, but were we to venture outside it, we could not bite wizards for hurting us. We are choking on the taste of webs. Set us free.”

“Do you wish to return to your home?” Harry asked, thinking of possible ways that he might convince—well, someone—to help him send a shipment of deadly South African hive cobras overseas. “I could make arrangements for that. You could live in a world without bindings again.”

“We wish to stay in the Forest,” the hissing returned. “We have made a nest, and our eggs shall hatch soon. But we will have it on our own terms. Our children must be able to learn self-defense, and to extend their tongues and scent no bindings.”

“It might take a while before that can happen,” said Harry, and relaxed his sight the way he had when first traveling with Fawkes, so that he could see the webs arching everywhere. There was a new, fierce orange glow in front of him, which Harry guessed was the web that had taken over the Many. He wondered who had spun it, then shook his head. It’s probably an old spell left by the Headmasters of Hogwarts, to make sure that no dangerous creature can simply move into the Forest and then venture forth and attack the students at any time. “I do not know how long it will take me to remove all these webs.”

“We want them gone.”
“And I said it may take time,” said Harry. He didn’t think the Many were stupid, just immensely stubborn.

“We accept that. But we will have your commitment. And we will send a pair of eyes with you, so that we may have reassurance that you are acting on your commitment even when you are away from the Forest.”

Harry saw a small, lithe movement low to the ground, and then one of the tiny cobras was coiling around his ankle, sliding up his leg. He extended an arm, and it slithered up his chest and then down to his wrist, coiling there. It was small enough that, when it had wrapped itself around twice, it felt no thicker than a bracelet.

“What do I call you?” Harry asked the snake, making a mental note to keep it out of sight. Snape had been acting more strangely than ever in the past few days, sometimes cold, sometimes snapping at him with familiar rage. Merlin knew what he might do if he saw the snake.

“This is one part of us,” said the mingled hiss. “You will call the one part the Many. Through this little one, all of us are with you, all of us are watching, and all of us, if need be, can come to your aid.”

Harry stifled his snort at the thought of what would happen if all the Many came flowing out of the Forbidden Forest at once. It probably meant there was something wrong with him that his first reaction to the thought was amusement, rather than alarm. “If you wish,” he said. “But I thought you had said that you could not defend yourselves even if you venture out of the Forest.”

“If we are doing it to defend a wizard, we can.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was starting to wonder which Headmaster had set the webs to do this, and to hate him or her. “Very well,” he said, and then glanced at the Runespoors. He had only ever spoken to them, briefly, during the wild full moon night last year when he’d run through the Forest with Sirius and Remus. He did not know what they would want of him, other than the ending of their web.

A three-headed Runespoor slid away from the others and raised its necks to look at him. Harry returned the gaze as steadily as he could, though he had to blink and the snake did not.

“Snake-Speaker,” said the Runespoor at last, as if something in the look they exchanged had satisfied her and not hearing him speak Parseltongue. “We are not like the centaurs, nor the Many. We will not make bargains for either offensive or defensive protection of you.”

Harry nodded, rather relieved. “Then is there anything you would like, beyond the breaking of your web?”

“Do you hear the singing?”

Harry frowned and listened for a moment. He could hear nothing more than the wind in the trees and the shuffling and shifting of the unicorns behind him. “No. What is the music I am supposed to hear?”

“When you can hear the music, then come to us. We will make sure that you learn to listen.”

The Runespoor turned and slithered rapidly back in the direction of the hill. The other snakes followed her, and dissipated. Harry blinked. And they say centaurs have a reputation for being enigmatic.

He waited a moment more, but the Runespoors did not return, and so he faced the unicorns. He was not sure how he was supposed to speak to them, until one of them let out a neigh that drifted like snow, and Fawkes trilled, and Dobby translated the trill.

“They would like Harry Potter to break their web this year,” he said, his eyes very large, “in return for the debt he owes them.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

Trill, neigh, trill, and Dobby was translating again. “Some time ago, you had the chance to save a unicorn and did not take it,” he said. “They sensed your presence when they came to mourn their dead. They did not know who you were then. Now they do, and they want to know why the vates would hurt them so severely.”
Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew what Dobby referred to now. He knew that Quirrell had been feeding on unicorns’ blood in his first year, but revealing himself would likely have meant his death. So he had watched Quirrell kill the unicorn, doing nothing to stop it.

“Killing a unicorn is a sin,” Dobby whispered. “And watching one be killed is not something the unicorns like.”

Harry heard the soft, bell-like clomp of hooves, and opened his eyes to see one of the unicorns coming forward. It stopped in front of him, so brilliant that Harry could barely stand to watch the shine of its coat, and then bowed its head. Its horn rested a few inches from his heart.

Harry could imagine what would happen if the unicorn moved forward, putting all the power of its head behind the blow, and speared him.

He could not pretend that he would not deserve it.

The unicorn stepped back and reared. Harry’s eyes helplessly followed the falling-star streak of light that was its horn, and then the golden motion of hooves as it turned and sped into the Forest.

And then the others followed after it, in a blazing rush, like the Milky Way come down and dancing in the Forest. Harry put a hand to his face to hold and wipe away the tears, and felt the tickle of a tongue as the Many on his wrist put out its tongue to taste the salt.

“We could have bitten it, and defended you,” said the snake.

“I didn’t want you to,” Harry whispered, and glanced at Fawkes and Dobby. “What was that about? What did they decide?”

Fawkes trilled, a low and musical sound. Dobby translated. “Unicorns are innocent, Harry Potter. They know the touch, the scent, of the innocent. That close, they could sense that you did not mean to let their fellow die, that you would have given your life in his defense if you could. You are forgiven.”

Harry closed his eyes. “You told me once that the unicorns were bound because they were too beautiful,” he said.

“Yes, Harry Potter.” Harry heard the slight impact of skin on skin as Dobby nodded his head, his ears flopping.

“What are they like?” Harry whispered. “Or what are they going to be like, when they’re free, if they’re that beautiful with the web in place?”

“Dobby does not know,” said the house elf, and his voice was subdued.

Harry took a deep breath and opened his eyes. His tears were gone, and that was all to the good. “I need to break their web,” he said. “But I need to break a web on a smaller scale first, to practice, and in a way I know won’t be against its owner’s will.” He looked at Dobby, and Dobby’s eyes stared back at him.

“Dobby,” Harry whispered, “how would you like to be free? I can at least ask.”

Dobby’s eyes widened until they seemed to occupy the whole of his face, and then he gave a tiny, halting nod.

Oh, Lucius is going to make me pay for this, but I will not trample on anyone’s will. I cannot. I am going to write a letter to him, and ask him to let Dobby go. Then I will do what I can. I shall doubtless have to study a bit before I can break his web, especially because he said once that his were half-frayed and not like other house elves’ webs, and there will be differences between his web and the unicorns’.

But he did not feel intimidation at the thought of asking, or even what Lucius would doubtless ask in return. He felt radiant contentment, which seemed to spill out of him until he shone in the dark like a unicorn.

I want to do this. I don’t know if there’s something I’ve ever wanted so much.

I want to know what a unicorn looks like without its web.

******
“Harry!”

Harry looked up anxiously, blinking, as Connor ran towards him in the Great Hall at breakfast that morning. This was the morning he expected the arrival of Lucius’s letter, since he’d sent his request off a few days ago, and anything else unusual happening made him jump.

It didn’t help, of course, that Draco made an annoyed sound, resenting the presence of Harry’s brother, and that the Many, who lurked under Harry’s sleeve and invisibly ate part of his breakfast, took the opportunity to make softly hissed comments about that. The Many had decided that they did not like Draco. Harry was actually glad for the web, now, that did not permit the Many to simply bite anyone they wanted out of the Forbidden Forest.

“What is it, Connor?” Harry asked, standing and moving a few feet away from the table so that he didn’t disturb Draco.

“A letter from Dad.” Connor shook his head. Harry didn’t understand the expression on his face. He was smiling with his mouth, but his eyes were worried. “I think you should read it.”

Harry took it, cautiously. He decided that the potion might have worked, from the simple fact that the lines didn’t stagger all over the page, but he didn’t know what he expected to find.

Whatever it was, it was not what James had written, since Harry felt cold shock pass into him, pressing tendon to bone.

Dear Connor:

I wanted you to know that I am well again. Harry brewed an antidote to the potion Snape gave me, and I am in my right mind. Remus has told me about the—things I did while under the potion. I am horribly embarrassed, but I will not waste time dwelling on them. If Harry is blaming himself for not stopping Snape, tell him not to. I wholeheartedly believe that he had no idea what his guardian meant to do.

It has, however, increased my determination to get Harry away from him. There are other ways than simply approaching the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, ways that I should have tried in the first place, given what I know about Snivellus. I am going to try them. What are they? You’ll know soon enough, since I intend to make them very, very public.

Please do not show this letter to Harry. It would only make him unhappy. I don’t want to make him unhappier than he would already be. But this must be done. The man who would do this has no right to be near and in control of my son.

Your loving father,

James.

Harry looked up from the letter to Connor. “But he said for you not to show it to me.”

Connor flushed, then scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah, well,” he muttered to his trainers. “I still thought you should see it. It concerns you.” He jerked his head back up and stared at Harry defiantly, as though he thought his brother would slap him for being concerned about him.

Harry smiled at him and shook his head. “Thank you,” he said softly, and handed the letter back to Connor. The shock in him was rapidly approaching panic, but he didn’t want his brother to think he’d made a mistake in showing him the letter. He hugged Connor, tightly, and felt the embrace returned. The Many made an angry comment about being jostled that Harry ignored. “It’s good to know that I’ve got at least one person I can depend on.”

Connor hugged him one moment past when Harry would have let him go, then turned and jogged back to the Gryffindor table. Above him, as if he had been waiting until Connor was gone so that he wouldn’t have to deliver the letter in the presence of a Gryffindor, Harry saw Julius stooping down.

He held out his arm for the great horned owl, and resolutely didn’t stagger when Julius landed and clamped down hard enough to draw blood. He actually held the letter in one talon, presenting it to Harry. Harry fumbled it open with the hand not occupied with being pressed against the owl’s tail feathers.

The message was short.

Potter:
You ask two favors of me, one more than the truce-dance allows. I, therefore, demand two favors in return, one of them in the dance and one outside it. I demand that I be allowed to specify the Midwinter gift I receive, and I insist that you come to a small gathering of Dark wizards and witches that I intend to hold in Hogwarts’s Room of Requirement on Halloween night.

You have my permission to free my house elf.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry smiled in spite of himself. Lucius was being a bastard, treading the edge of courtesy, but Harry’s asking for the favor of freeing Dobby had done the same thing. This was the first step to being a true vates. Harry could feel the thorns of the path yielding to roses for the first time.

“What are you doing?”

Harry found himself nearly jerked off-balance as Draco seized his shoulder. Julius gave a dangerous hiss and took to the air again, circling once over Draco. Harry thought for a moment that he would drop a pellet, but either he remembered that this was his master’s son or he decided it was beneath the dignity of a truce-owl. He turned and flew out the window of the Great Hall instead, his every feather a-ruffle.

Harry pulled and twisted lightly, and freed himself of Draco’s hold. “What do you mean?” he asked his best friend, who was flushed and had that odd look in his eyes again.

“You—I just don’t like you touching other people the way you did Connor, that’s all,” said Draco.

Harry narrowed his eyes and, on instinct, did something he’d never tried, forcing and focusing his sight on a wizard the way he would on a magical creature.

He nearly gagged when he saw a faint silvery-black web crawling over Draco’s face and arms and head. It was delicate, and Harry could not comprehend who had put it there, but he thought he knew what it was for. It had caused Draco’s strange behavior of late, behavior that focused around Harry.

Could he have borne this web even last year, when he convinced me that he loved me?

There was a disturbing thought, but Harry pushed it away. He didn’t have the right to worry about it. What mattered was freeing Draco of that web, and doing it as soon as possible.

“He’s my brother,” he just said, more mildly than Draco expected, from the blink of his eyes. “Now, come on, I thought you were going to tell me what interested you the most about Julia’s actions in Scotland.”

Draco let himself be distracted, chattering happily about how he thought Julia must have come to Hogwarts after she was a student and done something—strong—in regards to the school. Harry sat down with him again, his eyes narrowed. He seemed to be seeing the web around Draco all the time now, even when he didn’t want to.

“Why do you care?” the Many asked him, the words barely more than darts of the little snake’s tongue against his skin. “He is only one web among many. What makes him so important?”

Harry just shook his head. Draco needs and deserves his freedom as much as anyone else would. But it’s going to be a delicate balance. If that web focuses around me, then my spending time with him the way he wants is just going to sink its hold deeper. I’ll have to try to give him his own life as much as possible.

He found himself almost glad, in a fierce way, of the discovery. Not only would it mean freeing Draco sooner, but it kept him from wondering what his father was planning.

---

Chapter Twenty: Cry Havoc

Harry was at breakfast when the doors of the Great Hall opened. He craned his neck to see who would be coming in, blinking. Had the other schools already arrived for the Triwizard Tournament? Considering the way that everyone else
seemed so interested in it, Harry would have thought he would hear about that further in advance.

Draco poked him with one finger. “Harry. I was *trying* to tell you more about why I think Julia Malfoy was a Dark Lady.”

“And I was saying that she couldn’t have been, unless she actually declared herself to the Dark and a Lady at some point or another,” Harry snapped back, growing even more curious as he saw two robed figures, both witches, walking through the doors. “Just because she has a certain kind of power and a certain kind of disposition doesn’t mean she actually did what you think she did.”

“Why wouldn’t she declare herself a Lady?” Draco sounded huffy. He didn’t appear to take any notice of the two women as they walked rapidly towards the head table, but then, Harry thought, he wouldn’t. He was becoming more and more convinced that Draco’s web had something to do with this potion, though Merlin alone knew how; Draco still wouldn’t let Harry look at the book that he claimed to have got the potion recipe from.

“I don’t know, Draco,” Harry said, and then blinked as the two witches came close enough for recognition. One looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t place her until he glanced at the other. Though she had lank, mouse-brown hair now, she still wore much the same face as she had to visit him at Lux Aeterna. *Nymphadora Tonks. What’s she doing here?*

“What’s my cousin doing here?” Draco asked then, apparently noticing her for the first time.

Harry shook his head and stood up, trying to decide what to do. The second woman was Auror Mallory, the pretty but stern witch he had met in the Ministry just after he walked away from Fudge. He hesitated when he stood, though, not knowing what would be the best course.

The two Aurors halted in front of the head table. In a clear, ringing voice, Auror Mallory pronounced, “Headmaster Dumbledore, if we might have a moment of your time?”

“Headmaster Dumbledore, if we might have a moment of your time?”

“A moment and more than that, dear ladies,” said Dumbledore, inclining his head. Harry could see the wariness on his face, though, however well he tried to hide it; he had often worn such an expression around Harry. He didn’t know what was going on, either. In one way, Harry supposed, that was good. It meant this couldn’t be a plot of Dumbledore’s. On the other hand, Harry had to watch in uncertainty of what came next, and he hated uncertainty and sudden change.

“Thank you.” Auror Mallory bowed to him, and seemed to nudge Tonks with an elbow on the way down, so that the younger woman started and bowed a few moments behind her. Then she drew a scroll from her sleeve. “My pardons for doing this so publicly,” she added, to whom Harry didn’t know, “but Madam Bones felt it was best, given what we’ve learned about this man in the past few hours.”

Harry felt his heart lurch, and then speed to such an extent that he swayed on his feet. Draco took his hand, saying something that Harry couldn’t hear over his heartbeat. Millicent was grabbing his shoulders, as she had after Regulus was suddenly torn from his head, urging him to sit back down.

For some reason, although he couldn’t hear their soothing words, he could hear the Auror perfectly when she began to read.

“We have come, under sanction of Madam Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, to arrest Professor Severus Snape on charges of administering an insanity potion to James Potter—” Mallory had to lift her voice slightly when the chatter of excited students began to rise from the tables “—and a potion with unknown side effects to Minister Fudge. He did not register the creation of these potions with the Ministry, and in at least one case he did not send the antidote on his own. Both James Potter and Minister Fudge have filed charges.” The Auror closed the scroll with a shake of her arm and turned to face Snape.

Harry was glad he hadn’t eaten much, or he would have been tempted to vomit it all back up. He understood at once what was happening, but it had still taken him by surprise, and he was gasping and choking and trying not to become overwhelmed by it.

*James knows by now that trying to take me from Snape doesn’t work. So he’s taking Snape from me.*

Snape stood up, his face pale but composed. “I will protest these charges,” he said. “James Potter is a known rival of mine from our days here at Hogwarts. He would say anything that he thought might discredit me. And the Minister recently abducted my ward. It is not surprising that they would file these charges.”

“We have enough evidence to arrest you, sir,” said Mallory crisply. “There were eyewitnesses to Potter’s condition, in the
form of himself, Remus Lupin, and Madam Hellebore Shiverwood. The Minister and Augustus Starrise stand ready to testify that you fed the Minister an unusual potion the day that you visited him, on the autumnal equinox. And we have evidence of what the insanity potion was meant to do in writing, from your ward, Harry Potter.” She turned and glanced calmly over at the Slytherin table.

Harry felt his sickness increase. He had written a note to Remus along with the antidote, explaining its uses and why he believed it would counteract the insanity potion that James had taken. And he had included a line about brewing the antidote because he believed that Snape would never brew one.

The look of betrayal on Snape’s face was terrible. Harry flinched and tried not to run from the Great Hall. There were still things he had to do. His guardian might hate him at the moment, but that didn’t mean Harry could give up on trying to save him.

“Sit down before you fall down,” Millicent hissed in his ear, and pressed firmly at his shoulders.

“No, damn you,” Harry snarled at her, making her fall back in startlement, and tore his hand from Draco’s tightening hold. He slipped around the Slytherin table and set off towards the Aurors, his heart beating fast. Perhaps he was a coward, but he kept his eyes on the women instead of on Snape.

He did feel a hand brush his shoulder, briefly, as he worked his way past the Hufflepuff table, and glanced back to see Justin frowning worriedly at him. Zacharias’s face was as expressionless as it was most of the time, but he lifted his eyebrows when he saw Harry looking towards him and mouthed, “Good luck.”

Harry turned his head and, as if by fate, met his brother’s eyes. Connor looked stricken, but nodded firmly. Harry relaxed a bit. At least Connor wasn’t torn, thinking that he should support James in this—this crazily stupid idea.

This entirely legal idea. Snape really did do everything that they said he did.

That was what made Harry sweat when he finally halted in front of the two Aurors and bowed to them. Tonks had watched him come, her face growing more and more unhappy. Auror Mallory was watching Snape as if waiting for him to draw his wand and come after her, her posture tight and ready. Harry didn’t look forward to what would happen if Snape tried it. From the power he could feel buzzing under Auror Mallory’s skin, she wasn’t much weaker than Snape, and she had had training that might make the difference. If she forced Snape to resort to Dark Arts in order to defeat her, that would only give them another reason to arrest him.

“Aurors,” he said.

Mallory glanced at him, and blinked. “Potter,” she said. “Is something the matter?”

“I would just like to say that I do believe what my Professor says,” said Harry. “My father’s been trying to get at him for—a while.” He could show them the copies of the taunting letters James had sent, if it would help. _If it will keep Snape’s magic from being drained, or whatever they really are doing in place of sending prisoners to Azkaban._ “And the Minister doesn’t like or trust him. I can provide you with evidence of all of that.”

“You would turn against your own written evidence?” Mallory asked, her face skeptical.

“I did not realize what it was going to become evidence of, or I would never have written what I did,” Harry said.

He knew he had said something wrong when he saw the abrupt way the Auror’s face tightened. She shook her head. “Your loyalty is commendable, Mr. Potter, but misplaced in this instance. He _did_ do the things that he’s accused of. The motivations behind the accusations may not be pure—Merlin knows that I’ve seen this enough in my own line of work—but that does not excuse his crimes, which I hardly think were committed out of any pure motivations, either.” She shot her eyes back to Snape, who had shifted as if he were about to draw his wand out of his sleeve. Her voice dropped to a growl. “The best thing you can advise him to do right now is come along quietly.”

“And how are you going to punish him?” Harry tried, he really did, but he couldn’t keep the tightness out of his voice.

Mallory blinked. “Why—not at all, until after he’s had a trial and the Wizengamot has declared him guilty,” she said. “In a case like this, we can’t have anything less than the full Wizengamot try him.” Her face softened. “I can promise you, Mr. Potter, we intend to abide by the rules of law. _All_ of them. No punishment and no beating before the trial, no matter what you may have heard. Things were like that in the First War, I’ll grant you, but Auror Scrimgeour weeded all that out. It’d be my
job to try to do something to hurt a prisoner before his trial, no matter what he’d done to me or if I really believed him to be guilty or not.”

“But what about the Minister’s Hounds?” Harry demanded. “Can you guarantee that they won’t try to reach and silence him?”

“I will swear you a wizard’s oath that they will not.” Mallory looked thoughtfully back at Snape. “I don’t know exactly if he’s more threatened or threatening, but, in the name of Merlin and the name of my magic, he will reach his trial alive. Nothing the Hounds or the Minister may try before then will touch him, I assure you.”

Harry felt the oath settle into place around him, and knew it was all he was going to get from the Auror. She had already given him far more than she had to, probably out of pity for the child whose guardian could be so deceitful. He nodded, once.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Have you decided, Professor Snape?” Mallory’s voice was calm, but her wand was pointed at Snape now. “Are you going to resist us, which will add an extra charge to your file, or come along quietly?”

Snape snarled, a low sound, but to Harry’s relief, he did not burst out into one of the rages that had marked the last few days. He drew his wand from his sleeve and placed it, with great dignity, on the table, then turned and clasped his hands together behind his back. Mallory began promptly whispering spells that Harry thought were meant to confine Snape’s magic and body.

He took the chance to turn to Tonks. She looked down at him, face more unhappy than ever. “Tonks,” he whispered. “Can you speak to Scrimgeour when you get back to the Ministry? Tell him that I think the main motivation to arrest Snape was hatred and anger, and not justice?”

Tonks closed her eyes. “Harry…”

Harry knew he was asking a lot of her. It could get her sacked, and they weren’t even really formal allies. But he went on asking, anyway, with his silence, and when Mallory finished the final spell, Tonks gave him a reluctant nod.

Harry squeezed her hand, hard, then stepped out of the way and watched in resignation as Mallory led Snape down from the head table. Tonks fell into place on the right side of him, and they marched him towards the doors. Harry found his courage before they got quite that far, and lifted his head, meeting the burning black gaze he knew would be waiting for him.

It bored into him and tore him apart, but Harry weathered it. He had lived through this nightmare of losing parents and mentors before. He could live through it again. He let Snape see what he thought he should see there, and watched anger melt into confusion. Then the moment was over, and the two Aurors were leading Snape far enough away that he could no longer turn his head to meet Harry’s gaze without being obvious. He wouldn’t do that, Harry knew. The one thing that Snape hated most was being obvious, letting his enemies see how they had hurt him.

Harry watched the Aurors leave the Great Hall. To him, it felt as if they walked in silence, for all that the roaring around him rivaled the ocean on the beach at Midsummer. He turned only when he heard the Headmaster rise to his feet and call for quiet, a reprimand with an edge of compulsion in it. Harry shrugged the compulsion off, and heard the Many give an angry hiss on his arm.

“Students, students.” Dumbledore called, his voice sweet with sorrow. “Obviously this is a sad day, and we should be sad at losing a teacher of Professor Snape’s caliber.” Harry heard snorts that no one could have stifled exploding from every table but Slytherin’s; Snape had been nothing but a harsh teacher to the other three Houses. “However, I have no doubt that he will be back among us shortly. In the meantime, I will take over his Potions classes myself, having a modicum of knowledge on the subject.” He smiled gently, while the buzz of scorn and laughter turned to a sound of excitement. “I hope that no one will object to that?”

The sentiments that came back to him sounded to Harry most like “Hell no!” He shook his head, a faint smile appearing on his lips. Snape never had been popular, and then had sometimes wondered aloud why more students didn’t respect him than did. Harry had known it was impossible, even useless, to try and explain it to him.

“Then I declare all Potions classes canceled for today, so that I might have a day to learn the schedule and go over Professor Snape’s lessons plans,” said Dumbledore, and there came a series of appreciative whoops. In a softer tone, he added, “Please go sit back down, Mr. Potter.”
Harry turned and glanced at Dumbledore. His eyes were bright, confident. He had never looked more like the general of the Light whom Lily had taught Harry to revere. “We will get him back,” Dumbledore assured him.

Harry dipped his head, not meeting the other professors’ eyes, and then hurried towards the Slytherin table. With Potions canceled, he had no classes for a few hours, and he wanted to consider what he was going to do before he did it.

Of course, he already had the stirrings of a plan, but it would be a costly one, and solve only half the problem. He would find a better one if he could.

At the Slytherin table, he accepted pats on the shoulder from Millicent, reassurances from Pansy, noises of sympathy from Blaise and Vince—Snape was at least their Head of House, if he was nothing else to them—and an unexpectedly swift, tight embrace from Draco, who didn’t let him go until Harry told him, gently, that he really needed to go to Gryffindor Tower to see his brother. Then he didn’t protest, and Harry found himself more grateful for that than anything since the Aurors had taken Snape away.

_Taken Snape away._

_Well, I’ll just have to get him back, then._

******

Harry luckily—because he didn’t know the latest Gryffindor password—arrived at the Fat Lady’s portrait at the same time as Ron, Connor, and Hermione. Hermione took one look at Harry’s face and tugged on Ron’s arm, prompting him to fall behind. Ron blinked at her, looked ahead, saw Harry waiting, blinked some more, and then abruptly nodded, his face going a bit red. He and Hermione stood behind, while Connor came forward to meet Harry alone.

“I swear, I didn’t know Dad was going to do anything like that,” Connor gasped desperately, halting just a few feet away from him.

Harry hugged his brother, surprising even himself. He hadn’t realized how much he needed to touch someone right then. Maybe it was because his mind was whizzing along, barely seeming to be contained in his skull. “I know, I know,” he whispered, as Connor’s arms came up and tightened around him. “I know you would have told me if you had, just like you showed me his letter. And—well, I didn’t know either. I thought he was going to do—something else.” _And now I’m going to do the something else_. Harry took a hard breath through his nose. “I came to warn you. I really do love Dad, all right? And you. And even—even Mum.” Just because he didn’t want any more contact with someone didn’t mean he stopped loving them, Harry had found. Love wasn’t that easy to control. “I have to do something to help Snape, though. And this is the only thing I can think of to do. If it works right, it won’t even make a mark. If it doesn’t, then, well, just remember I love you. Really.”

“Harry?” Connor’s arms tightened abruptly around him. “Are you going to do something to hurt yourself?”

“Mentally,” said Harry, startled. _He thinks I would commit suicide, or threaten to? Of course not. There are too many people I can benefit by staying alive._ “Not physically.”

“Then I still don’t want you to do it.”

“I have to.” Gently, Harry disentangled himself from Connor’s arms. “I have to do what I can to protect Snape.”

“Maybe I want to protect you for once.” Connor folded his arms, scowling at him. “And I don’t want you to do this if it’ll hurt you in any way.”

“I have to do something, Connor,” Harry pointed out. “The Aurors already came and arrested Snape. It’s already begun.”

“Let him get out of it on his own,” Connor hissed, and Harry was surprised to see malice in his eyes. “Damn it, Harry, I know you feel you owe him, you may even love him too, but didn’t he bring this on himself? Let him deal with the consequences on his own. He _should_. Why should you have to sacrifice yourself _again_ just to defend him?”

“Because a willing sacrifice is different from an unwilling one.” Harry squeezed his arm. “And I have to shield him from this as much as I can.”

“You forgive too much,” Connor went on, hazel eyes glowing with that Gryffindor stubbornness that had caused so much
trouble last year. Harry hoped that it wouldn’t cause much now. Connor looked perfectly capable of tackling him and holding him on the floor to keep him here. “Sooner or later, Harry, people have to grow up. I had to. Snape’s an adult. Why shouldn’t he have to?”

Harry sighed. “There’s a limit to what I can do to help him, that’s for sure, but I would never feel good about myself if I didn’t try. I was partially the one who got him into this, by writing a letter with the antidote I sent to Remus.”

“You had to,” said Connor firmly. “Or Remus wouldn’t have known what it was or who it was from.”

“Yes, he would have. It came with Hedwig—” Harry shook his head and backed off the argument. “Never mind. I’m going to do this, and I just wanted to warn you, just in case it doesn’t work the way I think it should.” He gave his brother’s shoulder one more clasp, and then backed off and slipped away, his hand ducking into his sleeve as he went. A squeeze to the quill-shaped amulet that waited there, and a certain person would know he had a story for her.

“Harry!” Connor shouted behind him, but Harry calmly cast a wandless Disillusionment Charm on himself so his brother couldn’t follow him, and went to the Owlery, the place where he and Skeeter had agreed to meet.

“Harry!” Skeeter’s voice came through a window of the Owlery.

Startled, Harry glanced out the window and saw her riding a broom, her stiff blonde curls swaying unnaturally in the wind, her entire body looking horribly uncomfortable as it crammed onto the broomstick. Harry couldn’t help grinning slightly as he beckoned for her to come through the window. He knew that there were wards that prevented anyone hostile from attacking the school on a broom, but evidently the wards didn’t consider Skeeter hostile.

“I was on the verge of just starting a story about your guardian’s arrest,” Skeeter complained, as she transferred herself awkwardly from the broomstick through the window. Harry bit his lip and resolutely didn’t laugh as she nearly tumbled into a pile of feathers and owl pellets. Skeeter brushed her dress off and turned to face him. “Now Honeywhistle’ll publish one first. She’s stuck to the Minister’s side lately.”

“I think this should fulfill both your personas—the truth-seeking heroine and the gossip-monger,” said Harry, becoming sober again as he thought about what was going to happen. “I have a story for you that’s connected to the arrest of my guardian. And to my blood father, as well.”

He ignored the rushing in his ears. Yes, he had wanted to keep this private. Yes, he had never wanted to show any part of it to the wizarding world, because why should he? It mattered to his family and no one else, no matter what Draco and Snape said. And it will go on mattering only to my family and no one else, if Dad just does what he’s supposed to.

“You don’t know how much you know about my home life with my parents.” Skeeter eyes sparkled as she waved her wand and conjured a chair to sit on. She drew her quill and a scroll of parchment out, and focused a keen glance on him. “I’m waiting.”

Harry had thought very carefully about how to phrase this—not the actual article, but how much he would tell Skeeter. He met her gaze calmly, and said, “I don’t know how much you know about my home life with my parents.”

“Not much,” said Skeeter. “I mean, I know about the Auror investigation into your parents last year. Something odd about that, wasn’t there? They were under Dark magic or something.” She cocked her head. “That was when I was more interested in writing about the Boy-Who-Lived. I could find my notes, though.”

Harry smiled grimly. “Your notes won’t tell you about this.” His own voice in his ears sounded thin and windy. He controlled the urge to just collapse, or to curl around the secret and hide it away forever. He had no right to be so selfish. Snape might need this.

“My father spent almost all his time with my brother when we were children.” Harry began carefully. Leave Lily out of it. Leave your training out of it. You only want what will threaten James. “He cherished him more, laughed with him more, loved him more. The Dark magic incident last year? He was able to forget all about me under the persuasion of a simple
spell.” Harry lifted an eyebrow, forced himself to adopt a cynical and mocking expression, and chuckled. “How loving a father is one who can forget his child like that?”

Skeeter’s quill was speeding across her parchment. That was all, Harry told himself. He was not about to faint. He had to be strong. Strong people didn’t faint.

“Why did he love your brother more?” she asked, peering at him.

Harry snorted. “Can you ask? Connor’s the Boy-Who-Lived.” He saw the spark catch in her eyes, and knew she would believe whatever followed from this point forward. They had linked his name to his brother’s in the first article against Fudge as a matter of politics, but Connor still had the larger fame, the bigger reputation. Skeeter would be interested in and believe a tale of sibling jealousy and rivalry. Forgive me, Connor. Our relationship has improved out of all recognition in the past few months. But this is about James when we were still children. “And…” He trailed off on purpose, painted a pensive look on his face, and saw that he had her. Rita leaned forward, her quill brushing the edge of her teeth.

“What, what?” she urged.

Harry lowered his eyes as if embarrassed. In truth, he was forcing himself to consider these incidents as if they had happened to someone else. It was the only way to control the urge just to coil up into a tiny, tight ball and tell no one else, ever. Why would it matter to them? It was not important, could not possibly be important. James and Lily weren’t criminals. They were parents who had done the best they could, trying to raise a baby who was the target of Voldemort’s wrath—so far as anyone knew—and a son with magic too powerful for his own or anyone else’s good. They did not deserve to be arrested or punished. They had made mistakes, and everyone did that.

But he stepped over and around and past that, told himself that this truth need not come to light if James would only do what he was supposed to, and said, “And he was scared of me.” He flexed a hand, and let a small ball of light appear in front of him, drifting about and then winking out. No great deal, but he had done it without a wand and without a word. He looked up and met Skeeter’s eyes. “You were there, you said, when I attacked the Minister and Umbridge.”

Skeeter nodded.

Harry sighed. “So, I had the potential for magic like that as a young child, and my father was afraid of me. So he stayed distant from me.” He laughed a bit. “You’d think he’d have wanted to befriend me, make me love him, so that I wouldn’t ever turn on him, but that wasn’t the way it worked out.”

He choked back the astonishing wave of bitterness rising from his belly, and wondered about those contradictory impulses. Part of him, it seemed, did want to tell the truth. Harry snorted. Why? So you can get sympathy? Weakness, Potter.

Skeeter scribbled industriously, and then looked up. To Harry’s surprise, she seemed hesitant. She worried her lip with prominent front teeth for a moment. Harry remained still, wondering what in the world Skeeter would be nervous about asking.

He understood when she whispered, “Did he abuse you?”

Harry shook his head. “No, of course not! He never touched me.” He winced when he realized how that sounded, and added, “Except in the way a parent should touch a child.”

Skeeter went on staring at him. Then she said, in the voice of someone trying to be comforting when she didn’t know how, “That isn’t the only form of abuse.”

Oh. Oh, fuck. I’ve got to get her off this track. I just want to threaten James with showing that he’s not a model father. I don’t want to give her even the idea that anything like abuse happened at home, or he really could be arrested, and Mum, too. No, no, never. I can’t do that. I can’t tear them apart and leave them bleeding in public like that. It’s done, it’s over with, it never needs to come up again.

“He just stayed distant from me,” said Harry, and let a petulant, complaining tone slip into his voice. “I was a toy for him, someone he could play with when Connor was busy or asleep. And someone he was afraid of, of course, but he tried to mask that.” He sighed and leaned his head back on the wall. “You know why he’s trying to take me away from Snape?”

“Why?” Skeeter still looked a bit worried, but seized on the new distraction gratefully.
“Because he and Snape had a rivalry in Hogwarts.” Harry gave a great sigh and buried his head in his hands. “They’re both such children. Snape’s striking back at him for the same reason, but at least, with Snape, it’s expected, you know? He has a bad reputation already, as the Head of Slytherin House and a teacher most of the students hate. You’d think my father would be the better man, but no. He just has to try and take a son he never cared about anyway when we were children away from Snape, because it’s Snape who has me. And my father is supposed to be this glorious Light pureblood wizard and ex-Auror.” Harry shook his head slowly back and forth, hair rustling. “You’d think he’d be the better man,” he repeated.

He peered between his fingers to see how Skeeter was taking this, and saw the rapturous expression on her face as she wrote. He relaxed. For all her determination to make people admire her, Skeeter was a gossip-monger at heart. Little would please her more than taking down someone whom many Aurors and Ministry people still admired years after he’d left his position.

“Wonderful,” said Skeeter at last, looking up. “I can do a lot just with this. The article should be out in a few days—“

“No,” Harry interrupted.

Skeeter frowned at him. “Our deal—“

“I know what our deal is,” said Harry. “But this is different. I can give you plenty of other stories. But this one is personal. Private. Special. I only agreed to give it out at all because James will just not bloody well give up. I want to use this to blackmail him instead. If he doesn’t drop the charges against Snape, then—“ The words stuck in his throat, but he forced them out. “Then you can publish it.”

Skeeter hesitated, teetering. Harry watched her coolly. He understood her. She wanted the article published and people buying it, reading it, admiring her words in shocked whispers, James bleeding from the lash of a whip that he never saw coming.

On the other hand, she wanted the anticipation of it, too. And she wanted to be involved in intrigues at this level of power, to know things that other people didn’t as well as just spreading them the moment she knew. She wanted to have power over another person. She had a chance power right now, dictated not only by what articles she could publish but by the public interest, and her competition with Melinda Honeywhistle and other people, and how long the scandal would run. Harry was offering her something else, something more political in nature—the chance to run before, not behind, events.

Besides, she must know that if she published this article when he didn’t want her to, it was the last story she’d ever get from him.

Harry felt almost as if he were inside her head when Skeeter’s eyes lifted to his face and she nodded. He had looked in one of the registry books in the Hogwarts library just to satisfy his curiosity, but he really hadn’t needed to. He already knew, on instinct, that Rita Skeeter had been a Slytherin.

“Can I at least write the article and send it to him?” she asked, her voice plaintive.

Harry arched an eyebrow. “Of course. As long as it doesn’t slip out, even accidentally, to anyone else.”

“No,” said Skeeter, her voice a deep purr. “Of course not.”

“Send it with this letter,” Harry instructed her, and pulled a piece of parchment from his back pocket. “It explains everything in the simplest terms. He drops the charges, or he gets smeared across the front pages of the wizarding world.” He paused and gave her a stern look. “He’s got a week to drop the charges. If the article shows up before then, I will be very upset, Rita.” He hissed at the Many, and the little snake stuck its head out from under his sleeve and hissed back at him.

Skeeter’s face paled. “Is that—“

“A South African hive cobra. Yes.” Harry stroked the Many’s neck, and let the tongue tickle his hand. He made his voice cheery. “Did you know that if one of them spits in your eyes, it blinds you, and there’s no cure for that condition?”

Skeeter let out a sharp breath. “Really, no need to threaten me, Potter,” she muttered as she stood. “I want to keep this secret for right now as much as you do.”

Harry shrugged. “Just making sure.” He handed her the letter to James, then watched her get on the broomstick and settle herself again. She gave him a long, slow look that combined many things. Harry saw some fear and respect in there, though, and was content.
“See you later, Potter,” she said, and then pushed the broomstick out the Owlery window.

Harry closed his eyes and stood still for a long time. He could only hope James would see sense and not let himself and his family be dragged screaming into the public eye. Granted, he hadn’t seen sense before now, but, on the other hand, he hadn’t faced a threat this severe. Harry intended to make him back off or bleed in public, one or the other.

And if he bled, too, at least he had chosen to do so.

He opened his eyes and shook his head. I’ve done all I can for now, especially since the charges were true. I’ll wait and see if Scrimgeour can’t do something about the Minister before I move on that front.

And if he didn’t hurry, he would be late to Charms, anyway.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-One: To Be Slytherin

Rufus was glad that he had at least got to finish his morning tea before Aurors Tonks and Mallory returned from Hogwarts with Snape. It gave him some time to lean back, ease his nerves, and consider what, exactly, he was going to do.

Amelia had tried to pretend this was just another ordinary arrest. It wasn’t, not when the Minister himself had laid charges against the prisoner. It could not be, not when the charges were filed in concert with a different set of charges by a man who had reason to hate the prisoner. It came just after the Minister himself was accused of abducting the child at the heart of this storm. And the prisoner was the guardian of a child with Lord-level power, who could make life very difficult for the Ministry if they decided the wrong way.

It was all, Rufus considered as he took another sip of his tea, quite complicated. A good job for Amelia that I’m currently the Head of the Aurors, and know Potter, and am aware of all these complexities.

He set the teacup aside and studied the papers sprawled all over his desk. He had discovered enough information to take him close to his ultimate goal. He’d intended to wait, though. A large part of any strategy was timing. He couldn’t just charge in and accuse the Minister of the things that the papers proved he had, in fact, done. He would need to go through a careful legal process, and he had to pick just when it was best to begin and end the process.

But, then again, he thought, lifting his eyes to his door as he heard footsteps pound among the desks outside it, sometimes the circumstances around me shift, and don’t give me the chance.

Someone banged on the door. Rufus rolled his eyes and nodded to young Percy, who sat on the other side of the room, copying down one of the less important papers. Percy jumped, as though he found his superior’s gesture more startling than the noise, and then hurried over to open the door.

Rufus watched his back, thoughtfully. Percy didn’t say much anymore, just copied and listened and grew more and more pale by the day. Rufus wondered if he even realized how much he was learning, and that Rufus’s main purpose in taking him under his wing wasn’t to control one of Dumbledore’s spies. Probably not, though. Percy was still too caught up in the perceived drama of having betrayed his family by refusing the position his father had secured for him.

Tonks hurried through the door the moment it opened, nearly crushing Percy to the wall. A moment later, she measured her full length on the floor in front of Rufus’s desk. Rufus just raised an eyebrow and waited for her to speak. The girl was a good Auror. He would defend her to anyone who asked. At least she didn’t try to mumble without lifting her face, the way that someone more embarrassed with her own clumsiness might have done.

“Sir,” Tonks gasped, “I spoke with Harry—I mean, with Potter, when Mallory and I went to the school to arrest Professor Snape. He wanted me to talk with you and see if there was anything you could do to help his guardian.”

Rufus blinked once, twice, then shook his head. He still wasn’t used to someone with Lord-level power who asked instead of demanded. Dumbledore would have been here already, trying to cozen the Minister out of the charges, if this was someone who truly mattered to him. Other Lords Rufus had been familiar with, past and future, would have had no qualms about trying to tear the Ministry down. Potter still asked.

Or trusted me to handle it.
Rufus stamped on the peculiar feeling of warmth rising in his chest. He could not afford to be that partisan. He liked the boy, yes, but his Ministry came first. If the boy had been making accusations against Cornelius without merit, then Rufus would have gone after him just as easily for wasting an Auror’s time. It was just good that there was dirt on Cornelius, and that so far Potter seemed to understand that he couldn’t just come in and take over the Ministry.

“I will indeed do so,” he said, and saw Tonks’s face ease. Hmmmm. “Auror Tonks,” he added, as she stood up again and swiped dust from her robes.

“Yes, sir?” She glanced up at him. Her brown hair was already turning green, a much more cheerful color.

“I hope you remember,” said Rufus gently, “that our allegiances are always to each other and the rule of law first and foremost, above any personal loyalties that we might have.”

Tonks promptly blushed, even growing larger cheeks to blush in. “Yes, sir,” she said, more meekly. “I just—well, I met the boy over the summer, when he was still living with his blood father. I just wish he didn’t have such a hectic life. It’s not good for him. Or for anyone else, if he gets too stressed and strained,” she added. “Sir.”

Rufus nodded. “Harry Potter has a way of collecting people,” he said. “Simply make sure that you are not blinded by the cloth of his pocket.”

Tonks flushed even more brightly, but just nodded and managed to back out of the office without a word or a fall. Rufus sat back behind his desk and held out a hand. Percy was already there, hovering, and handed him a folder with a copy of all the case parchments in it, from the original document filed by James Potter claiming his child back to the latest round of charges.

Rufus looked over them swiftly one more time, as he heard the unmistakable sound of Auror Mallory’s voice lecturing a prisoner on how good he had it. No, he was finding nothing to contradict his basic impression of reading between the lines. Yes, Potter was going to be upset, and had the right to be. No, Rufus did not believe the timing of these latest charges was a coincidence, and he did not think that the Minister was only acting in a disinterested way for the good of the wizarding community.

But that still meant Severus Snape was an idiot.

*******

Snape kept his head high and his eyes locked forward, not deigning to return the stares of the lesser men and women who sat among their desks and chased paper for a living. The infernal witch with him would not shut up, but that did not mean he had to pay attention to her. She must have been a Gryffindor, he thought, to have so much to talk about even after their journey outside the school and their Apparition to the Ministry.

“...don’t realize how lucky you have it, not really. Auror Scrimgeour is overseeing this case himself. Of course, the circumstances are rather unusual, since after all he did lead the investigation of the boy’s parents last year. Couldn’t have the parents of the Boy-Who-Lived infested with Dark magic, could we? And Auror Scrimgeour hates Dark magic. But what he found was rather unusual. Of course, you probably know about that. Might have been the one who cast it...”

No, Snape thought, lured into paying attention in spite of himself, that was Harry.

Harry.

He knew that the boy had not meant to write any words that could be used as evidence against Snape; that was only too clear in the moments after Mallory had announced what had happened. His ward’s eyes had been distressed, his face clearly revealing the emotions the charge called up inside him. But it had still happened, and Snape wanted to grab and shake the boy for it. Why hadn’t Harry anticipated that particular consequence of his actions? Wasn’t he Slytherin enough to do so?

And why had he brewed that particular antidote for James, when he knew full well that Snape did not believe James deserved it?

Snape shook off the thoughts when he realized how close they were to the Head Auror’s office, and did his best to settle himself into his cold thoughts again. If that bloody phoenix hadn’t come and showed him the vision of his burned notes— notes that he now wondered about, given that Harry must have come into his office to learn how to brew the antidote for James—then he would still be all right. He could face any accusations effortlessly, fend off any shows of concern or nattering
about the letter of the law. With the ice gone, and inconvenient emotions once more sliding through him like frogs through muddy water, he wondered what could be done.

_I will find out_, he thought, as Mallory opened the door to the office and ushered him through. _Scrimgeour is Harry’s ally_. _That ought to count for something._

“Here he is, sir,” said the infernal woman, and deposited him roughly in a chair in front of Scrimgeour’s desk. Snape turned and gave her a long, slow glare. Mallory gave no sign that she’d noticed it was happening. “Would you like me to stay, or do you think that you can handle him alone? His hands and his magic are bound, and I have his wand. I made sure of that,” she added.

Snape stiffened in rage. He hadn’t even noticed her picking up his wand from the head table. His back had been to it, granted, but he ought to have done. His hands squirmed inside the tight bonds of the silver cords she had fastened about them, yearning to be free. _Let me only get one spell on my lips, and I will show them what a Dark wizard can do._

Then he told himself to be still, and stopped moving his fingers. He was acting childishly again, ridiculously. This was not the kind of thing his mother had told him to do, not the kind of thing that any wizard who had gone cold to survive would do. He breathed deeply, trying to relax, trying to rise above the emotions and see everything clearly, calmly, rationally.

“Thank you, Auror Mallory, I think I can question him on my own,” said Scrimgeour’s voice, and Snape focused on him again. The man was sitting casually behind his desk, in a posture that probably eased his bad leg, but at the same time looked entirely natural. His yellow eyes hadn’t looked away from Snape once since he’d been brought into the office. “But please, stand right outside the door. When I am done questioning the prisoner, I’ll need you to escort him to a holding cell.”

“Of course, sir,” said the infernal witch, and bowed, and exited the office. Snape relaxed a bit. It had been unnerving, traveling confined with someone who was as strong as she was. No, she could not challenge him, not quite. But that margin of error was too small for comfort when his hands and his magic were so expertly bound up.

He knew that the Auror would probably defend him if they were suddenly attacked, but that was no guarantee that he would be safe from her.

“Ah, Snape.”

Snape’s eyes snapped back to Scrimgeour as the door shut. This was not how he had expected the interrogation to go, not with the Auror’s former manner and one of the younger Weasley spawn in the office. The elder wizard was leaning forward, and looked almost pleasant.

Snape scrutinized his face for a moment, carefully. _He is Harry’s ally, and he was Slytherin. Does he intend to go easy on me because of that? Was all his calmness before only a façade to fool that woman?_

“You’re an idiot,” said Scrimgeour.

Snape blinked for a long moment, cursing himself for being caught off-guard like that, and for not being prepared with a retort more quickly than he was. At last he narrowed his eyes and was able to say, “I would think this would constitute abuse of prisoners. I see you are continuing that fine Ministry tradition.” But it took far too long, and Scrimgeour watched him, not with anger at having his methods compared to Fudge’s abduction of Harry, but with cheerful contempt in his eyes.

“Not at all abuse, Severus,” said Scrimgeour. “May I call you Severus? Of course I may. I’m older than you are, and considerably cleverer, if the way you’ve acted in the last month is any indication. You are an idiot. Head of Slytherin House, Potions Master, and yet you couldn’t chose any subtler way to show your enemies your disfavor?” He shook his head, clucking his tongue. “Such a disappointment, when the wizard who’s been out of the House for more than forty years has to scold the one who’s been in daily contact with it for two decades and more. You haven’t been acting very Slytherin, Severus. The very fact that you’ve been caught shows me that.”

Snape could, if he turned his head, see the gaping eyes and mouth of the young Weasley. He felt rather gut-punched himself, though of course he did not allow his eyes to widen or his mouth to fall open in that undignified manner. The cold barriers shattered and fell away from his mind completely, and the frogs of his emotions stirred and swam.

Scrimgeour seemed to take his stunned silence as invitation to continue. “Where have your mistakes come from? Oh, there have been so many, it will take some time to enumerate them all. First, you did not pursue legal action against Cornelius immediately after the abduction. And why not? You had an eyewitness in the form of Harry. You could have filed charges
against him. And you did not. Even if Harry didn’t want to, Severus, you should have. You have the ambition and ruthlessness necessary to get the Minister sacked, and if you had used that flood of outrage in the first days after Skeeter’s article was published, you might have managed. But you made no motion. I wonder why?

“I’ll tell you why. You wanted to punish your enemies more personally. That’s always been a Slytherin weakness, you know—wanting to stand over the writhing bodies of those we hate and gloat. But it’s an avoidable weakness. It’s certainly not one that I would have expected you to fall victim to.”

Snape found his tongue at last. “What is this?” he said. It did not sound like a splutter, he was sure, because Severus Snape did not splutter. “What right do you have to lecture me about my actions? I believed this was an interrogation, held according to formal legal rules—”

“Oh, it is,” said Scrimgeour. He leaned back and folded his arms, smiling at Snape, looking as if he were in immense good humor. “I’m simply interrogating your stupidity, Severus, and no lesser culprit. And I don’t need Veritaserum, or the beating that you no doubt expected. A good dash of intelligence and the expressions on your face are my only tools.

“Then comes the second mistake. You did not take steps to prevent your past actions, including your reputation as a Death Eater, from being used against you. Why? That was another easily avoidable blind spot, and you ignored it. Perhaps that was only a continuation of a past mistake, though, and not a new one,” Scrimgeour added, in a musing tone. “You’ve acted for the past thirteen years as though no one would come after you for that, as long as you hid at Hogwarts and taught. But, on the other hand, it was an issue last year when we were arranging your legal guardianship of young Harry. That’s another thing you could have used that flood of good publicity to do, you know: show yourself forth as a good guardian. But you did not.” Scrimgeour paused to give him a single, severe censuring look.

“I have nothing to say to you,” said Snape, and lifted his chin, and looked away. Unfortunately, the only things to look at in the office were the photographs, which were utterly ridiculous in their number and display, or the Weasley, who still hadn’t shut his mouth.

“And then there was the third mistake, and, I think, your greatest,” Scrimgeour said, as if he had not heard or did not care about Snape’s declaration. “Severus, Severus, Severus. Really. _Gryffindors_ are the ones who let schoolboy rivalries rule their lives and influence their legal wrangles decades later. Slytherins use the good parts of their school experiences and put the past behind them. You did not. Perhaps you could not, though in truth, I hope it is not that second thing. We do not need someone who cannot let go of his past raising a child as powerful as Harry.”

Snape’s hands clenched in his bonds, and he resisted the urge to snap that Scrimgeour knew nothing, _nothing_, about either what Snape had suffered at the hands of James Potter and his friends, or the savage abuse Harry had taken from his family. He was not speaking. His sudden words would have to hold the force of a vow, even in the face of this extreme provocation.

“And so you used a potion with such obvious and traceable effects,” Scrimgeour said, his voice slightly muffled. Snape darted a glance at him, and found the Auror with his head in his hands, shaking it sadly. “In front of witnesses, no less. You make me despair of you, Severus. Are you sure that the Sorting Hat said Slytherin and not Hufflepuff? Though, in truth, your loyalty would only be to yourself.” He lifted his head and gave Snape a patronizing stare it seemed he must have learned from Dumbledore. “No, on second thought, I believe it must have said Gryffindor. This is the kind of rash, hot-headed thing that one of them would do.”

“I was a Slytherin!” Snape hissed between his teeth, and then clenched his jaw, berating himself for letting the other man bait him.

“Yes,” said Scrimgeour. “I knew that. Just not a very good one, Severus. Or you would have noticed your own mistakes and corrected them before now.

“So you not only used a potion with such obvious and traceable effects, you left it intact, rather than brewing the antidote and sending it undetectably.” Scrimgeour closed his eyes and shook his head in sorrow. “Wanting an enemy to suffer is no good when it obstructs your goals. And I would have said that your goal was to retain guardianship of young Harry.”

Scrimgeour opened his eyes and fixed Snape with a sudden, scorching stare. “But perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps, after all, you took up this guardianship not to benefit the boy, but to get one over on his father.”

“I did not!” Snape found himself lurching forward in his chair, his emotions swirling and kicking up to the surface of his mind. “James Potter would be _nothing_ to me if he would stop trying to take Harry back!”
“You should have let him be nothing to you regardless,” said Scrimgeour, his face utterly stern now. “A Slytherin does what he knows will do him and his friends and allies good, and he does it undetectably. I know we are very different in our allegiances, Severus, but I would have thought we were at least alike in that.

“This slipping of an unknown potion to the Minister, in such a way that it left traces Augustus Starrise could notice, is the last straw, the mistake that truly makes me think you are worthy of being arrested and sent to the new equivalent of Azkaban. Did you plan to kill him, Severus, or blackmail him?”

*Blackmail*, Snape thought, and bit his tongue to avoid letting it out. Scrimgeour seemed to see the answer in his face, though, and nodded.

“You have lost control,” the Auror said, softly, almost kindly. “You have let your anger outrun you, and you have made no effort to restrain yourself. And now it has torn gaping wounds in both you and young Harry. I don’t like that on a personal level, I must admit, especially after I went to such lengths to insure that you could retain guardianship of the boy.”

He leaned forward across his desk, his eyes never wavering from Snape’s face. “But more, I am offended as a Slytherin. Why did you act the way you have done, Severus? Why? Give me one honest answer.”

Snape closed his eyes and breathed harshly. He was acting like an emotional idiot. If only he could rebuild his walls, then he could answer as a mature, rational adult—

A mature, rational adult who had made all those mistakes that Scrimgeour talked about while behind his ice walls.

Snape went still. For a moment, a shudder seemed to invade his stomach and creep up towards his throat, and, incredulous, he wondered if he were actually about to vomit the small breakfast he had eaten. Then he realized his hands were clasped so tightly in his bonds that his wrists seemed about to tear the ropes. He shook his head, sharply, once, not even sure what he was denying.

“Come, Severus,” said Scrimgeour, his voice stripped of all its spite. “You can tell me. You *must* tell me. I think I deserve an answer, after laying out all your mistakes for you and making you see them in a new light.”

*A new light*. Snape fought down the urge to laugh hysterically. Yes, one might call it that.

He looked back on the last month in his mind, a mixture of his own memories and Scrimgeour’s words, and shook. Had he truly done that? Had he truly been *that* stupid? It seemed impossible. As if awakening from a dream, he could see the insanity potion and the Meleager Potion, and he wondered what in Merlin’s name he had thought he was doing. Their creation was at once a combination of the most cunning intelligence and the most mind-numbing stupidity. Oh, yes, all very well to create an untraceable potion, but then to feed it to the Minister in such a way…and to create such effects with the insanity potion that the wretched woman in the Department of Magical Family and Child Services would *know* something was wrong, because the effects only began when Snape showed up…

And Harry.

He had said he would train the boy in Dark Arts so he could defend himself, and yet, he had not explained more than a quarter of the spells he showed him—the best times to use them, the variations on the incantations that would produce more or less subtle results, the ability to cloak them behind similar Light spells that had allowed Dark wizards to survive for centuries undetected by the Ministry. He had simply demonstrated, and expected Harry to understand immediately. The boy had imitated him, flawlessly most of the time, and not demanded the explanations. Snape had been creating a killing machine with not the least idea of discretion in employing the spells, the very thing he had said he was going to stop.

He had not thought, for one moment, that Potter might not take the consequences of the insanity potion lying down, or that Harry might investigate and brew the antidote, at his brother’s urging if not his own. He had not thought of what Augustus Starrise might notice when entering Fudge’s office just after they left. He had not thought of anything, but simply reacted in a short-sighted manner, bulling ahead.

He had not even checked, at least in the last two weeks, what the book Draco was using might have done to the boy.

Snape closed his eyes and released a long hiss.

He had been acting more *Gryffindor* than he ever had in his life.
He opened his eyes and answered Scrimgeour’s question. “I did all that because I was behaving idiotically.”

The Auror simply stared at him for a long moment. Then he smiled, as though approving a rather slow student who had at last managed to master an essential lesson. “Very good,” he murmured. “Good. There may be some hope for you after all.” He tapped a hand on the parchments spread on his desk, though Snape couldn’t read them from this angle. “I have some plans to set in motion, plans that this debacle has only encouraged me to speed up, not create. But it will go much more smoothly if I know that you are not intent on causing more trouble.”

“What do you want me to do?” Snape asked, his throat tight. It made him feel a fool, still, to ask for advice, but after Scrimgeour had enthusiastically ripped open his other mistakes, he didn’t see that had a choice.

“The smart thing,” said Scrimgeour. “The subtle thing, that will make your enemies overconfident. The Slytherin thing. Bow your head and sit still for right now. No one will be looking for a threat coming from you, and they shouldn’t have to. You’re arrested. You sit there, and you look humble and penitent. Appearance is half of everything at this stage in the game. If you rage and spit and persevere in your idiocy, you only hand your enemies your wand.”

Snape felt his hands flex in his bonds, this time out of instinct. “I hate being helpless,” he said. “I began this in the first place so that I would not have to feel that way.”

Scrimgeour gave him an unimpressed look. “Then I think you should reconsider your feelings and your hatred,” he said, standing. “You’re not helpless, anyway. You’re being helped. I am certainly going to do everything in my power to do so, and young Harry is already moving, or I don’t know him.”

Snape blinked. Another consequence I did not consider. “But what can he do?” he asked. “He has you as an ally in the Ministry, but no one else that I know of.”

“He has the Skeeter woman on his side.” Scrimgeour’s voice was extremely dry. “He’ll appeal to her first, I should imagine. And after that…who knows? The Dark wizards I met that day would be a good start.” He raised his voice. “Auror Mallory! I need you to escort the prisoner to a holding cell.”

As the office door started to open again, Scrimgeour gathered the papers on the desk together with a wave of his wand. They massed in front of him, hovering, and Scrimgeour used the sound to conceal his murmur to Snape. “I mean it, Severus. No more idiocies, however you might think they can help. Leave it up to other people to defend and protect you, since you’ve put yourself in the position of having to be defended and protected.”

Snape lowered his eyes instead of snapping out an immediate reply, as was his impulse. None of his impulses in the past month appeared to have been right.

“Are prisoners allowed to send post?” he asked abruptly, as Mallory gathered the cords around his wrists together and hauled him up.

“It will be read before you send it,” said Scrimgeour. “But yes.”

Snape nodded stoically. He desperately needed to send a letter to Harry, and one to Draco—carefully-worded, of course, because he did not want to think of Harry’s reaction if he learned, at this stage, that Snape had set a compulsion on Draco and it had gone wrong. That could come later. Harry had to worry about getting his friend free, first.

“Come on, you,” said Auror Mallory, and tugged at his bonds.

“Careful, Fiona,” said Scrimgeour, just a touch of rebuke in his voice. “He is no longer quite as stupid as he was when he came here.”

The tugging eased at once, and Mallory led Snape towards the lifts, which, he suspected, would bear him to a holding cell where he would have much time to think.

He actually welcomed that. He felt as if he needed it.

*******

Rufus started to leave his office, and then turned back and collected Percy with a glare. The boy shut his permanently gaping jaw and hurried after him, but he did whisper, as they wended their way through the desks, “Sir, why did you allow me to
“Because I thought you needed to hear it,” said Rufus crisply, not glancing back at him. The boy was one of those potential Aurors who had never considered the career, and who needed to be carefully nurtured into it. It was about time that Percy had his eyes opened to some of the wonderful, necessary, but unofficial things about working in the Ministry and defending the rights of ordinary witches and wizards. A dressing-down, rather than an interrogation, was sometimes called for.

Actually, Rufus felt sure Percy had already grasped that. The tricky thing would be teaching the boy the subtle art of reading people so that he would know when a dressing-down would work and when it would not.

And he was about to learn something else—perfectly legal, but not truly official, much like the waltz of paperwork that Scrimgeour had danced through the summer months, foiling incompetent busybodies who were trying to find some way to punish young Harry for freeing the Dementors. It was not his fault if they could not keep up with him. The truly intelligent and committed people in the Ministry, the ones working to keep it free of any one interest’s or Lord’s touch or taint, would have been able to follow him. Rufus could salute a worthy opponent.

He was on his way to make one of them into an ally, at the moment. He halted in front of the glass door displaying her name and knocked once.

“Come in!” came the call, and Rufus opened it and strode in.

Amelia Bones looked up from behind her desk, adjusting the monocle in one eye so that she could see him better. She was a short witch, her hair graying, but her outthrust jaw and piercing eyes gave her all the authority she would ever need. She’d been the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for over a decade, and she looked calmly at him now, as if she knew what he carried in his hands and was unimpressed.

Rufus knew she didn’t know anything about this, though, because he trusted her integrity. He laid his bundle of papers on the desk and nodded to them. “The top three only,” he said.

He knew very well that only his long acquaintance with her allowed him to get away with this, but the thing was, he would get away with it. He was busy being a better Slytherin than Severus Snape could be in a month of Sundays. The long slow look that Amelia gave him showed it, as she then turned and began to read the stack of papers after giving him that long slow look.

Her face paled. She shot her eyes back to Rufus. “You’re absolutely sure about this?” she whispered.

Rufus nodded to the documents. “These are copies of the ones from the archives, Amelia, but I can retrieve the originals easily enough. Yes, Fudge did create these Hounds, and yes, he did hire Aurors we’d sacked for using Dark magic without permission to staff them, and yes, he did capture and try at least one other person in secret before young Mr. Potter.” Rufus felt his jaw twitch. The Minister often did that to him. “And he—executed at least three more.”

“Call it murder,” said Amelia, even as she went back to reading. “Not execution.”

Rufus felt free to relax and take a chair, massaging his aching leg as he did so. Percy hovered behind him, not seeming to know what else to do with himself. Rufus shrugged. The art of gracefully standing in a corner was another one that the boy would have to learn.

Amelia made it halfway through the third paper before she drew her wand and hexed a mirror she kept in the corner of her office. It shattered, but the pieces of glass only flew a short way out of the frame before reassembling themselves. Rufus smiled slightly. Most Heads of Departments had a mirror like that somewhere in their offices, for stress relief if nothing else.

“Something must be done,” said Amelia flatly, turning to him. “But what? What, for Merlin’s sake? We won’t have another election for three years, and the full Wizengamot has to agree unanimously to sack the Minister. They won’t. I know they won’t. He has too many bought allies.”

“There’s another thing the Wizengamot can do,” said Rufus, leaning forward. “And you only need a simple majority there, not consensus.”

Amelia stared at him for a moment longer. Then hope and color surged into her face, and she smiled sharply at him. Rufus smiled back at her.
“You weren’t a Slytherin for nothing, were you,” Amelia murmured. It wasn’t a question. “Very well, Rufus. I’ll call for a vote of no confidence. But you know that it can’t be done that quickly. It might be near the end of November before the Wizengamot votes.”

“I know,” said Rufus. “I don’t want to hurry it, Amelia. I want to rip out every weed that Cornelius has planted here. We’ll do everything nice and legal and proper, and that way no one can accuse us of anything.” It always amazed him how few people thought of legal solutions. Handle them right, and it was extremely hard for an opponent to challenge you. And Rufus Scrimgeour had always believed in neutralizing opponents or persuading them over to his side. None of this letting them have ground to bring charges against him instead, the way Severus Snape seemed to think was best.

Amelia nodded slightly. “And even then, it won’t be easy,” she warned him. Rufus thought she was speaking against her own hope as much as his. “Cornelius still has money behind him, and not everyone will be persuaded by the new evidence.”

“If I’m right,” Rufus murmured, “some of Cornelius’s more fanatical supporters have convinced him that his fear of the Dark is justified, and they’re using the chance to strike mostly against Dark wizards, through him. That means the Light pureblooded families, and one in particular. I think I know a way to take out most of his support at a single blow.”

Amelia knew him too well, at least once he revealed his plans. Her eyes narrowed. “And what will it cost us, Rufus?”

“If I fail? My support. I’ll have to step back,” said Rufus. “But I really do not anticipate that happening.”

Amelia stared at him for a long moment. Rufus stared back, calmly. This was the way things had to happen. And there were some risks that couldn’t be lessened. The one he was about to take was one of them.

Amelia sighed, at last, and nodded. “Then go do whatever it is that you’re going to do,” she said. “And don’t let me hear about it.”

Rufus smiled grimly at her and stood. “I assure you, Amelia,” he said, “the wizard I’m about to challenge will keep everything perfectly legal and respectable.”

She winced at the word *challenge*, but her eyes were steady. “As you will, then,” she said.

Rufus inclined his head at her, and then strode out of the office, young Percy in tow. The poor boy looked ruffled. Well, he was getting quite an education this morning.

And he was about to get a deeper one.

******

“Rufus Scrimgeour. This is an unexpected pleasure.”

Rufus bowed slightly, as much as he could with his head in the flames of the hearth, never taking his eyes off the face of the wizard in front of him. Augustus Starrise sat calmly on a divan covered in cloth of gold, his hair braided with the usual bells that proclaimed his status as a dueling war wizard, and thus his utter contempt of the need to move in silence, because no enemy could take him. His hand rested on a glass of wine, but he’d put it down when his house elves told him who was waiting to talk to him. His eyes were piercing and curious, both at once.

“Mr. Starrise,” said Rufus, the words spilling easily from his lips, “I have come to challenge you to single combat, under the terms of the Sunset Accords of 1163, a week from today.”

Augustus blinked slightly, very slightly, and then inclined his head. “The price to be the usual one?” he asked quietly. “No meddling in politics of any kind for the loser, for a year after the victory?”

“I am willing to extend it,” said Rufus. He could not let his prey avoid this trap. “Five years, if necessary. Yes, if I lose, I step back, Augustus. And if you lose, you step back from your support of Cornelius.”

The Light wizard closed his eyes for a moment, and then shook his head, making his bells ring. “A year should be sufficient, I think,” he said. “I accept your challenge. A week from today, we dance.” He opened his eyes and gave Rufus a smile that brought back old, old memories. “I look forward to it.”

“And under the sunset be it sealed,” said Rufus, and pulled his head back from the flames, brushing the soot from his hair.
He straightened and met Percy Weasley’s horrified, fascinated gaze. The young wizard swallowed several times before he could move his tongue. Rufus waited, and watched, massaging the old wound in his leg.

“It’s a duel, then?” Percy finally managed to whisper.

Rufus nodded. “What you heard. The dance for this duel locks onto the wizard once the combat has taken place. If Augustus loses, then he won’t be able to give money or support to Cornelius any more—or anyone else, for that matter—for a full year. If I lose, then I can do nothing more than act in my position as Head of the Aurors for a full year. No office politics, no Ministry politics, no maneuvers of the kind I suggested to Severus or Amelia.”

Percy shivered and stared at him. “What happens if someone meddles in politics anyway, after that?” he whispered.

“Well, that’s only happened twice,” said Rufus. “The magic coming and cutting off a limb if the offending wizard breaks his word is considered sufficient price.”

Percy closed his eyes and shivered again. “Do you think you can take him, sir?” he asked.

Rufus half-closed his eyes, memories flashing behind his eyelids. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “He gave me this scar.” He drew back the sleeve of his robe to show a long, pale mark twining around his wrist and up towards his shoulder. “That came from the last duel I fought against him. I lost.”

Percy all but squeaked. “But, sir, if you lose—”

“I know,” said Rufus. “But I don’t intend to.”

Percy only stared at him.

Rufus rolled his eyes and made for the lifts. Use the weapons against your enemies that will work, that will utterly prevent them from troubling you in the future. Against an idiotic Slytherin, exposure of his idiocy. Against a Light wizard, Light dances.

I do not see why this lesson is so hard to understand.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter 22: And Unleash The Dogs of War

James folded his arms, bowed his head forward on his desk, and left it there.

He could hear sounds, if he listened for them: the steady fall of rain outside Lux Aeterna’s windows, the sound of a Levitation Charm being snapped at a heavy trunk, and then the sound of footsteps as they made their smooth way down the stairs. He didn’t want to hear them. Or rather, he wanted to hear them, but only so they would drown out the sound of the written words echoing in his mind.

What he most wanted, silence, was impossible.

After a few moments, James raised his head, blinked, ran a hand through his hair, and then drew the envelope lying on the desk towards him again. Two papers protruded from it. He shoved the larger one away with what he knew was an expression of disgust, and picked up the smaller one, a simple square of parchment.

The hand and the message were equally simple and unpretentious.

Father:

I know what you have done to Snape. I want him back. So I am going to release the information about the part you played in my childhood unless you drop the charges you filed against him. You have a week from the day of Snape’s arrest to drop them. If you don’t, then one way or another, I am no longer your son.

Harry.
James’s fingers twitched, and he resisted the temptation to look again at the letter, to try to find something in it that his son had never put there. Simple, straightforward, heartbreakingly clear, it left no room for doubt. Harry hated him.

*Just as Remus said he would.*

James squashed that thought, too, and picked up the larger piece of paper. It wasn’t published yet; he had Merlin to thank for that. But it had been made up like a newspaper article, and the headline stood out at the top in damning letters.

**HARRY POTTER NEGLECTED BY OWN FATHER**

**Brother of Boy-Who-Lived Reveals That His Father Regarded Him as a Toy**

*By: Rita Skeeter*

In a shocking disclosure, Harry Potter, the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived and the recent victim of alleged abduction by Minister Fudge, has revealed that his father, James Potter, who recently filed charges against Severus Snape for misuse of an insanity potion, neglected him as a child.

Potter, 14, refuses to call it abuse, but does say that his father paid more attention to Connor Potter, his famous brother, than he did to his elder son. The small family lived, together with Lily Evans Potter, James Potter’s Muggleborn wife, in a house at Godric’s Hollow for most of the boys’ childhood.

“He just stayed distant from me,” explained Potter, in a private conversation with this reporter [yesterday morning]. “I was a toy for him, someone he could play with when Connor was busy or asleep. And someone he was afraid of, of course, but he tried to mask that.” Potter believes his father may have been afraid of him for his magical power, which, as before reported in The Prophet, has reached Lord-level since last November.

Potter also believes that his father’s filing of charges against Severus Snape, his guardian for the past year, rests not on a deep desire to have his elder son back, but on what he calls a “rivalry” between the two men forged in their Hogwarts years.

Potter admitted that Professor Snape has a bad reputation as the Head of Slytherin House, but also that he would have expected better of his father, a “glorious Light pureblood wizard and ex-Auror.”

James Potter gave up his Auror position shortly after the attack on his sons on Halloween of 1981, in which Connor Potter defeated You-Know-Who. It was believed at the time that he wanted to go into hiding with his family, but according to his son, all was far from domestic bliss in the Potter home.

“My father spent almost all his time with my brother when we were children,” Potter explained. “He cherished him more, laughed with him more, loved him more…How loving a father is one who can forget his child like that?”

Potter added that, since Connor is the Boy-Who-Lived, he would have expected decreased parental attention to himself, but he still somewhat resented his father for challenging another man’s guardianship of him.

“And he was scared of me,” he stated. Potter believes that his potential for Lord-level magic scared his father away from him, and that, as he has the same potential now, nothing has truly changed in the way his father perceives him.

The charges against Severus Snape include improper use of newly-created potions and failure to register such potions with the Ministry. His trial has so far been set, tentatively, for the middle of December. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore has taken over Potions classes at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

James Potter has so far been unavailable for comment.

James sat back and rubbed his eyes. Behind him, he heard the footsteps come to a halt, but he didn’t turn around and face them. Perhaps it was childish, but he didn’t see why he should have to.

“I’m leaving,” said Remus.

“Good luck on your journey,” said James, stiffly.

Remus made a small sound that reminded James of nothing so much as a snarl. “You could still salvage this, you know,” he said then, and caused an old resentment to rise in James. *Counselor to all of us, until the bitter end.* “I know that Harry hates you right now, but if you visit him, or write him a letter if you don’t feel up to doing that—”
“Stop it, Remus.”

There was a little silence, and then Remus’s voice again, clipped and soft and futile. “You’d rather sink with your stupid pride than throw a lifeline out to shore? Harry would grasp it. You know he would.”

James’s hands tightened on the article, crumpling it. Good. I don’t want to look at it any more. “It’s not that simple, Remus.”

His old friend’s voice went cold. “It can be, or I would never have been able to reconcile with Peter. And I wish you’d had the good sense to do the same thing with the people you really need to. Goodbye, James. Remember that if you send a letter to me or Peter at the Sanctuary, it will take some time to reach us.” He turned around, snapping something at the trunk, and James heard him leave. He sat in silence, the wards tingling around him, until he felt Remus step outside them and Apparate.

Then, biting his lip, James picked up a quill and began his response to Harry.

It would have been simple, after all, if he didn’t have a wife and another son who might be hurt by this. But he did, and that meant there was only one answer he could give to Harry’s blatant threat.

He wrote with a heavy heart.

When did everything go so wrong? When did Harry start feeling more loyalty to one of his professors than his own blood family, even when that professor embarrassed his father so horribly?

******

“Calming Potions,” announced Dumbledore with a degree of satisfaction, his eyes shining at them over his half-glasses. “We will begin working on the variations of the simple calming draught today, and work our way up to ever more complex potions. Please open your books to page 437.”

Harry dutifully did so, listening in silence to the excited chattering of the Gryffindors. They had been much more cheerful ever since Dumbledore took over Snape’s classes. And Harry had to admit that Dumbledore wasn’t half a bad teacher. He did explain things more slowly than Snape, and he could give more encouragement, even though he didn’t possess half of Snape’s theoretical knowledge.

But Harry could not forget what else Dumbledore was, not when he could feel the current of compulsion that soothed a fight beginning to erupt between Blaise and Dean Thomas, or when the encouragements to Neville had an extra edge to them. He kept his eyes down, and worked hard, and tried not to show how bored he was. Snape had had him on seventh-year work, and despite the lifetime of practice Harry had in pretending to be less competent than he really was, it was surprisingly hard to go back to fourth-year brewing.

He stood up to fetch the violet petals and other ingredients they would need, and Draco caught his arm. Harry glanced at him inquiringly. Snape had made them partners a few days before his arrest, and Dumbledore had seen no reason to change the arrangement.

Now, Harry almost wished he had. Draco’s eyes were gleaming with the bright fever they’d taken on in the past few days, and the black-and-silver web around him pulsed, visible even when Harry wasn’t looking for it.

“Harry,” Draco whispered. “Can you fetch me some powdered bicorn horn and sphinx claws, too?”

Harry recognized those ingredients at once. They were for Draco’s mysterious potion, about which he still refused to say much, but which he had dedicated himself to passionately.

“Draco—“ Harry whispered.

“It’s all right,” said Draco. “I think I can get one of the preliminary steps in the potion done today. A lot of the ingredients are the same as a calming draught.” He paused and stared challengingly at Harry. “Unless you’re not going to help me any more, of course, and I have to fetch them myself.”

Harry rolled his eyes and went to get what Draco had asked him for. Arguing with Draco had become more useless than ever.

Harry had, tentatively, touched the web, especially when they were in the library and Draco was lost in yet another book on
Julia Malfoy, while Harry researched house elves’ webs and how he might break them. The web did not react well to any attempt to touch it, it seemed. It simply writhed—once Harry had thought it even hissed—and slithered closer to Draco, wrapping his head and arms and shoulders. Harry could see the tendrils where it had sunk into his brain, and try as he might, he could think of no way to detach it without ripping out half Draco’s sanity along with it. He was not about to risk that. He’d been through enough of that himself, after the Chamber.

He was at his wits’ end to do anything other than help Draco complete the potion as fast as possible. The web seemed tied to that. It certainly grew brighter whenever he talked about it.

*Complete the potion,* Harry thought as he balanced all the necessary ingredients on a tray, not for the first time, and the web should let him go.

He was reminded, also not for the first time, that that might be as much wishful thinking as honest hope.

He settled down beside Draco again just as Dumbledore swept past their table. Harry cast a wandless glamour to shield the extra ingredients from the Headmaster’s sight, and looked up with a small smile.

“You boys have everything you need already?” The Headmaster looked the very picture of kindness. Harry just watched him, even as Draco nodded and smiled and put on the sweet, innocent mask he’d grown expert at adopting of late, whenever someone who wasn’t Harry questioned him about his life.

“Yes, thank you, sir,” said Draco, and flicked his wand at the cauldron, causing the fire beneath it to light. Dumbledore bobbed his head pleasantly at them both, and then carried on around the room, pausing to give Neville a gentle scolding on the color of his calming potion.

“Calming potions,” Draco muttered beneath his breath, flicking the powdered bicorn horn into the cauldron with precise movements of his fingers. “At our age. Honestly.”

“Is that why we’re not making one?” Harry muttered, even as he used the mortar and pestle to grind the violet petals down into a fine paste. He knew what he needed to do as well as Draco did. He had *listened,* not merely heard, while Draco chattered on and on about this step of the potion.

“Not just that,” said Draco seriously. He spoke with his attention on the cauldron as the potion turned an odd orange color, and Harry thought that might have been the reason he said what he did, not realizing what had just slipped out. “So that I can become my father’s magical heir, too. Or at least magical heir to a member of my family.” He flashed Harry a hard smile. “I think that’s a very good reason.”

Harry blinked and clenched his hands briefly together. *Research on Julia Malfoy, and this potion, which he’s told me he’ll divide into two equal portions, one heavy and thick, one light and airy. I should have known.* “Draco,” he said quietly. “Are you trying to call her ghost to you?”

Draco stiffened abruptly, and Harry saw the web around him blaze so brightly that someone else should surely have seen it. Then he whipped around and faced Harry, his face unfriendly.

“What do you know about it?” he whispered.

“Enough to know that necromancy is dangerous unless you make the sacrifices,” said Harry, and filtered the violet petals into the potion in five equal pinches. “And you haven’t.” He felt his heart beating faster, and for a moment, everything in the class blurred but Draco’s face. “And I don’t think that you have any intention of making them either, do you?”

Draco snorted at him, and the web calmed a bit. “I don’t need to,” he retorted haughtily. “Not if I can finish the potion by Halloween. That’s the night ghosts walk in full strength. She’ll hear and heed my call. She’s got to. I’m a Malfoy.”

Harry thought privately that the ghost of Julia Malfoy did not need to do anything. She had struck him through the reading he himself had done as an independent woman, quietly used to getting her own way, but used to it nonetheless. If Draco called her, and especially on a night when the barrier between the ordinary wizarding world and the world of necromancy was at its weakest, then he would get a response, but it might not be the one he wanted.

“Draco—” he began, even as he shredded the sphinx claws.

Draco reached over and closed one hand on his hand. Harry blinked. Draco hadn’t touched him in a day or two, and Harry
was startled and worried to see that it wasn’t just the gleam in his eyes that was feverish. His skin felt hot as well.

“Harry,” Draco whispered, “please, will you just support me until Halloween? Only until then, I promise. I need your help with the potion. Well, I don’t, I mean, I could do it on my own, but I want your help.” He drew in a deep breath. “I don’t think there’s anyone else I would trust with as much of this as I have you. You’re the only one I could trust, the only one I could ever trust.”

Put like that, Harry thought, how could I refuse? He was still trying to make it up to Draco for his years of neglect and simply scooping the insides out of their friendship without giving anything back in return. What Draco wanted of him was simple enough, and it meant that Harry could watch his web and his fever and see if either of them worsened. Perhaps he would even find a way to loosen the web, if he really searched.

And it would give him something else to worry about other than Snape, and the reply from his father, which was due tomorrow at the latest.


“I want you to sleep tonight, though,” Harry told him. “You look as though you’re getting sick, and you might make a mistake in the potion.”

Draco blinked, then rubbed the side of his face. “You’re right,” he said. “I was up late last night studying, and the night before that. I can’t collapse and just exhaust myself before I have to summon her. And someone else might notice if I get too run-down. Thanks, Harry.”

Harry relaxed his shoulders. He would have to wait and see if his suggestion actually worked before he trusted to it, but at least Draco sounded sincere right now, and Harry would persuade him again at bedtime, if necessary.

Draco looked back at the potion, now a slow blue, and frowned abruptly. “Bother,” he said. “I forgot, we’ll need more powdered bicorn horn than that.”

Harry started to stand, but Draco shook his head at him. “No, no, I’ll go get it,” he said, and slid out from behind Harry. His hand came down to squeeze on Harry’s shoulder, hard, once, and then he hurried into the storeroom.

Harry added half the sphinx claws and stirred counterclockwise five times. Dumbledore swept past again, but just winked at him. Harry ignored the Headmaster.

He became aware of a quiet purring sound.

Harry squinted down with one eye, and saw an old-looking book poking out of the top of Draco’s bag. He recognized it at once, though he still didn’t know the title. It was the book Draco was always reading outside the library, the one that seemed to have given him the idea of the potion in the first place, and which he wouldn’t let Harry see.

Now, Harry could reach down, shift the book a bit, and read the title, if he wanted.

Snape had to have given it to him, Harry thought, staring fixedly at the book, even as he went back to shredding the sphinx claws. His parents might have, but I don’t think that he had it those first few days back at school, and they certainly didn’t send it by owl. And it feels magical.

For a moment, Harry suffered a more profound doubt in Snape than he had known in years. Could the book have put the compulsion on Draco?

Then he shook his head. No. Snape wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t take away someone’s freedom like that. He was concerned, just like me, that Draco wasn’t getting enough independence. It would be counterproductive to put that kind of compulsion on him when he wanted Draco to be his own person. The web has to come from something else—or, if it’s from the book, Snape can’t have known this would be the result.

He wouldn’t do something like that.

“Here we are, Harry!”

Harry glanced up with a smile. “Just in time,” he said, as Draco hurried up with the powdered bicorn horn. He felt calm and
virtuous, even with the sight of the crawling black-silver strands on his friend’s head. He had not looked at the book. He would not pry into Draco’s secret until Draco was ready to tell him. “Add three pinches to the cauldron, will you?”

Grinning, Draco did so.

Harry eyed his web sideways as he stirred the potion again. They were going to complete it by the end of the class, and they could safely bottle it and store it somewhere until it was needed in the full potion.

*I’ll stand by him. I’ll make sure he’s free. His life and his freedom are just as important as anyone else’s.*

*******

“Potter! Stay a moment.”

Harry halted with a wince, but turned around. Moody had just showed them the Unforgivable Curses in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry was feeling a bit sick, and he had watched even Zacharias Smith look unwillingly impressed. Harry wished he could stop thinking about the Killing Curse slamming into his forehead and Connor’s that long-ago Halloween night, as he had seen it in a certain Pensieve, and condemning them both to this strange life.

Besides, this was the day that his father’s reply was supposed to arrive, if he was really dropping the charges against Snape. Harry wondered if, by this time tomorrow, every one would be looking at him in pity and wonder and scorn—the boy who was neglected by his own father, the boy who was jealous of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Draco lingered for a moment, too, but Harry shook his head and whispered, “Do you know, I think that a spell called the Soul Strength Spell might help in detecting any sympathy-song between your soul and Julia’s.”

Draco’s eyes brightened, and he patted Harry’s shoulder comfortingly and rushed away. Harry took a deep breath and turned around to face his Professor, who limped towards him with steady motions of his wooden leg. He handled it so well that Harry could sometimes almost forget it was there, rather like he tended to forget Scrimgeour’s limp when he was faced with the man.

Moody’s face had become easier to look at—though easiest of all when his gaze was spread out over a whole classroom of students, and not just focused intently on Harry. Harry watched a point just above the normal eye, where the magical one didn’t tend to roll, relaxed, and waited.

“Wanted to ask you something about the Killing Curse,” Moody grunted, scratching the side of his scarred nose. “Didn’t want to make a big deal of it in class, you understand, with everyone watching, but thought it worthwhile to ask you in private.”

Harry nodded once, a light, tense bob of his head. He didn’t know why he continued to be uneasy around this man. Moody had done nothing to hurt him, Rosier’s warning notwithstanding. The silver gleam of the collar about his neck reminded Harry of the Hounds now and then, but Moody had been loud in his denunciations of the Minister for having Snape arrested. He was just an intimidating teacher, that was all, not quite as good as Remus, but good enough.

“It’s as though Regulus’s dislike of him passed into me, since he can’t be here anymore,” Harry thought, with a pang of disquiet, and reached out after his friend again. Still nothing. There had been nothing but silence in that part of his brain ever since the autumnal equinox.

“—brother survived it,” Moody said, and Harry realized, with a start, that he hadn’t been paying attention, one of the first times that had ever happened. When the ex-Auror spoke, most of his students listened. “I just wondered if you could remember anything about that night? If you yourself know the source of your brother’s exceptionalism?”

Harry fought the urge to hiss at the man. All his old protective instincts were up and barking, but he restrained them. Moody was not threatening Connor. He was just asking a question, a question that most people must have wondered about at one time or another, but would have directed to Connor himself or kept quiet about. It was still there behind their eyes, though.

*How’d you do it?*

“No, sir,” said Harry, letting a regretful frown pull at the corners of his lips. “I was only a baby, remember, and I wasn’t the one who survived the Killing Curse.” He kept his eyes firmly on Moody’s. Let them flicker off to the side, even a little, and Moody might know he was lying. “You could ask Connor, though. He might know better than me. Surviving that has got to leave a mark on someone.”
Moody gave him a wolfs-head grin. “Funny thing, Potter. I did ask him about that when I taught his class the other day. And he went white as a ghost and stammered out some nonsense about not being able to see right. Do you know what he might mean?” Moody leaned forward in interest.

Harry let his eyes widen in feigned surprise, while his mind sped. He would bet Connor had been on the verge of blurting out the memory in the Pensieve, before he remembered that they were supposed to keep it quiet for now, and hadn’t recovered himself in time. Well, there was no reason that he should do so. Connor wasn’t trained in lying and concealment as Harry was.

“Well, our cots were below the level of the door, you know,” said Harry. “And when Voldemort—"

“Strange, that you refer to him by his name,” Moody said softly.

Harry cocked his head. “I think it’s silly to call him You-Know-Who, sir.”

“Why?” Moody bounced his wand on his palm, both eyes fixed on Harry now. Harry was just glad that the magical eye couldn’t read thoughts. He armed his Occlumency shields anyway, though.

Harry shrugged. “It’s a silly title. If there was some better one, then I’d take it. But Voldemort is the name he chose, so I don’t see why I can’t call him by that.” He bit his lip on the next words: that he could also call him Tom Riddle, and if anyone in the world had the right to call him that, it would be Harry or Connor, whose heads he’d sequestered himself in. But he didn’t see the point in referring to it.

Moody studied him for a moment, then gave a grunt and a nod so abrupt he looked like a heron spearing a fish. “Continue.”

“When Voldemort came in,” Harry continued, “he would have shot the spell at Connor from above. Maybe he can remember part of it, but he couldn’t see him fire the curse.” He let a bit of envy creep into his voice. Might as well practice, if that article is going to be published after all. “That’s different, though. He never told me that he might be able to remember any of it.”

Moody grunted again, and tapped his wand against his lips. Harry tried not to think about all the incidents that might result from that, and waited.

Moody at last fixed him with both eyes, and said, “Do you ever wonder about freedom, Potter?”

“Freedom, sir?”

“Freedom.” Moody nodded firmly. “Freedom to just—do what you like. You’re very powerful.” Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes over the way Moody sounded on those words. Impressed, just like anyone else. Isn’t there anyone who can see that magic doesn’t prevent someone from being a bad friend, the way I have been with Draco? “Have you ever thought of letting go all restraints and doing just what you like? That’s how a lot of Dark wizards and witches get started, you know.”

Harry shuddered at the mere idea. “No,” he said.

“No?” Moody used a rising inflection. Harry narrowed his eyes. He’s surprised. How can he be surprised, after he’s seen me in class day in and day out?

“No, sir,” he said firmly. “I’d hurt too many other people. And that matters to me. That matters a lot.” He hesitated, but he didn’t know the purpose of this conversation. On the off chance that Moody was trying to get him to bare his soul, Harry still had no desire to bare his soul to him. “I don’t want to do that,” he finished, simply, and shifted his feet as he glanced at the door. “Is that all, sir? Only, I’m supposed to go study for Transfiguration, and—"

“Go, go,” said Moody, with a dismissive wave of his hand, and Harry hurried off, shaking his head. Strange. I don’t know what he thinks he’ll catch me in. Does he think I would suddenly blurt out some desire to be a Dark wizard, right in front of him? That would be a death wish, with how much he hates Dark magic.

Harry did glance back, once, to see Moody still regarding him, not even his magical eye rolling towards his lesson plan for his next class.

Harry shivered and all but ran out. He probably does think I’m going Dark. Honestly. Absolute power does not always
corrupt absolutely—and I’m very far from absolutely powerful, anyway. Dumbledore and Voldemort are still stronger than I am. I wish everyone would stop acting as though my magic matters so much. What matters is what I do with it.

******

Harry saw the post owls coming, and held his breath. Four, and one of them broke off over the Gryffindor table and fluttered down to Neville, doubtless bringing him a gift from his grandmother.

The other three came to the Slytherin table, one of them landing beside Draco. The other two extended their legs to Harry, one already snatching food impatiently from his plate, as though it had had a long flight.

Harry took both letters, but made himself put off the one that, by the seal on the envelope, was from Lux Aeterna. His hands were not shaking as he opened the one from Snape. They weren’t.

Harry:

I wanted to apologize for my behavior lately.

Harry blinked and peered hard at the letter. Nothing happened to the words. “Aspectus Lyncis,” he muttered, just in case, but no trace of a glamour sprang into existence on the paper.

It seemed that it really was Snape writing this. Harry shook his head in wonder and continued.

I have had a friend recommend Slytherin behavior to me, and I intend to follow it. My trial is slated for December 21st, the day of longest darkness. I suspect that someone is making a point.

You are to bear up and keep your strength ready until that day. It may be that you will be called as a witness, or may volunteer as one.

Keep a watch over Draco. I have noticed of late that his behavior has altered. I will write to him with my concerns, but I am not sure they will make much impression on him.

Remember that I will not be kind if you have sacrificed something irreplaceable in a mad plan to free me.

Severus Snape.

Harry closed his eyes, took a long breath, thought, Let us see what I have sacrificed, then, and opened the letter from James.

It was short. It did not have to be long.

Harry:

I am dropping the charges against Snivellus, at your request.

Your loving father,

James.

Harry couldn’t restrain a whoop of triumph, one that pulled even Draco’s attention from his own letter, which looked to be from Snape. “What’s that?” he asked, and snatched the parchment even before Harry could hold it out. He looked up, eyes wide with surprise, a moment later.

“What did you do?” he demanded of Harry.

Harry waved a hand. “Who cares? It won’t happen now.” He could feel the world opening out before him for the first time in a week. He still didn’t have Snape free, that was true, but he had him one step closer to it. Only the charges from the Minister remained now, and Harry would wait a short time still to see if Scrimgeour might be able to do something; he didn’t even know if Tonks had spoken to him yet. Then he would put any number of plans he had into motion.

“What did you do?” Millicent insisted, and took James’s parchment from Draco. She reacted with her own whoop, and from there the letter had to go to Pansy, and Blaise and Vince demanded to know what was up, and the parchment passed down most of the Slytherin table.
Millicent pounded Harry on the back, hard enough to make him gasp and choke. “I don’t know what you did, Potter,” she said, eyes shining fiercely, “but it was worth it, whatever it was.” She grinned at Pansy. “I think that someone might just happen to know where some butterbeer is, and if so, we’re celebrating tonight!”

It was, Harry thought, his heart singing. It was worth it entirely. He caught his brother’s anxious eye from across the room and smiled at him. Connor relaxed with a loud sigh that caught Hermione’s attention. Unsure how much Connor might have told her, Harry looked away.

Since I’ve lost so many rounds lately, it feels good to win one.

As if mocking that thought, the black-and-silver web on Draco winked malevolently at him.

Harry narrowed his eyes at it. I’m going to get rid of you, see if I don’t.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Three: Dancers In the Light

“You’re still taking a risk.”

Rufus stifled the impulse to snap at Kingsley as he settled the dueling bracelets into place about his wrists. “Yes, I know that very well,” he said, rather than the insult he’d been thinking of. He was almost—almost—sure that Albus Dumbledore had approached Kingsley and inducted him into the Order of the Phoenix, rather than Kingsley seeking Dumbledore’s approval. Nevertheless, he could not forget that one of his Aurors was working for a Light Lord who wanted nothing so much as to muck around in the Ministry. “But it’s a risk I chose to take.” He clasped the dueling collar into place and glanced at the younger wizard over his shoulder, waiting.

Kingsley flushed, though his skin was dark enough that it was hard to see. “I—yes, sir, I see that.”

“Good,” said Rufus mildly, and then closed his eyes to feel the buzz of the collar’s magic surrounding him. This was nothing like those foul things Gorgon and Morologus had worn, and which it had nearly cost the Hounds’ sanity to remove. This collar merely recorded that he had chosen to enter the dance of his own free will, and that he remained within its boundaries of his own free will. Despite the consequences for violating the ritual if the loser attempted to meddle in politics before the year’s term was up, the heart of this was not about compulsion, a tool of the Dark, but choice. “Come, then.”

He turned and swept out of his office, his wand riding light in his pocket, the bracelets and the collar equally light on his wrists and neck. He limped, as always, but that did not mock or mar his stride. Kingsley followed behind him, grumbling.

Young Percy already waited in the dueling courtyard, a specially-equipped area on the first floor.

Rufus felt his Aurors’ gazes trailing him as he walked between their desks, and heard many murmurs of, “Good luck, sir.” He nodded back with bare tilts of his head, enjoying the smooth pyrite of the collar as it caught him up now and then. His Aurors knew that he was fighting a duel with Augustus Starrise, and some of what it meant. None of them knew of the vote of no confidence that Amelia intended to introduce into the Wizengamot today. She had decided to wait until after the duel, and nothing Rufus could say would sway her. She was still his superior.

But not now, Rufus thought, and intense delight surged through him. He was on his way into one of the oldest testing places of all, the dueling courtyard, and what occurred there was between him and his opponent. And he was going about it properly, with the bracelets and the collar and the knowledge of the spells he would use all close to him as his own skin.

Rufus Scrimgeour had declared himself for the Light when he was twelve years old. Many people had thought him mad, to declare so young, and when he was in Slytherin, not least.

Rufus had never regretted it. Not for a day. The Light was the best way of doing things, when it was used right. Or perhaps it was more correct to say that it contained the best way of doing things. Better to let people make their own choices, within boundaries that prevented them from trampling on other people’s choices, and with absolute honesty, and in harmony if at all possible. Rufus had looked between Light and Dark that long-ago day, and chosen the path he thought would let him best accomplish all those things.

White trails of racing radiance began to coalesce behind his eyelids. He smiled. He kept his eyes shut, and the radiance shot ahead of him, leading him a smooth path so that he didn’t trip or stumble.
All the wizards and witches he passed, going about the ordinary everyday business of the Ministry, fell silent when they saw him, and many bowed and stepped out of the way. Rufus could see that, though he still kept his eyes shut. A second kind of sight was blooming above the white trail, the Light showing him the way.

Those who worked and lived within the Light had to use their eyes, in more ways than one.

Rufus opened his at last when he climbed out of the lift and turned in the direction of the dueling courtyard. He could feel his opponent already waiting for him, hot as a summer breeze and as patient. Augustus Starrise had always been patient, at least since a certain night almost exactly thirteen years ago.

Rufus stepped through what looked like an ordinary door, Kingsley close behind him, and emerged into the courtyard. It could not have been outside, but it appeared to be so. Light filled it from wall to wall. Vines climbed those walls, which were made of closely-fitted white stone, and raised enormous blossoms, the shape of trumpets and near the size of them, to the sky. The blossoms themselves were golden, streaked with brighter, paler streaks that reminded Rufus of the colors he saw when he pressed his hand over his tightly-shut eyes. The grass was smooth and soft as a child’s blanket, and a very deep shade, closer to purple than green.

Rufus ran his eyes over the garden before he turned to acknowledge Augustus. Yes, as he watched, starburst after starburst opened above the walls, and split into pairs of white birds, large as peacocks and having something of the phoenix about them, though they shed no heat. The birds perched on the walls and stared intently. One of every pair stared at him, and one at Augustus.

These were the ritual’s witnesses, come to make sure the dance was performed perfectly. If one of the wizards participating in it did break his word not to meddle in politics for a year after he had lost the duel, then the birds would coalesce into one creature far greater and come at noon to tear one of his limbs off.

Rufus simply breathed for a time, nearly dazed and overwhelmed by the presence of Light magic, thick and pure and strong. He thought he would have needed more time to recover, but his exposure to young Harry had helped him overcome the swimming sensation that was usually the result of standing in the middle of so much power.

That, he thought as he finally turned to face his opponent and bow, and his exposure to a young man named Tom Riddle, three years ahead of him in Slytherin, who had radiated Lord-level power all the damn time, and had been a minor factor in Rufus’s declaring himself for the Light.

Augustus bowed back, and then stood facing him, features calm and expressionless as iron. Rufus traced one hand over his arm, following the line of the scar the war wizard had given him the last time they dueled.

That had been right after the fall of Voldemort at the hands of Connor Potter, when Augustus had come seeking the name of the Auror who had been with his twin sister, Alba Starrise, on the night of her suicide, and failed to prevent that suicide.

Rufus kept his eyes on Augustus’s face, but he saw, how he saw, other eyes, locked staring and dead above a protruding tongue and broken neck. Her golden hair had fanned out about her head, pale and perfect and lovely. Alba Starrise, last victim of Voldemort before he fell. He’d left her alone for three minutes while he went to fetch her a cup of tea, and she had managed to hang herself anyway.

Rufus knew he was lucky to have escaped with the scar alone. That had been because he was the Auror who failed Alba, not the one who had actually done—whatever it was the Death Eaters did to her. Augustus had never learned the names or identities of those Death Eaters, or he would not have hesitated, with the mood he was in after losing his twin, to call down the Caerimonia Inrevocabilis, the highest and sternest of the old Light justice rituals.

That particular ritual claimed the life of the one who invoked it, but it also claimed, without exception, the life or lives of the enemies he had called it against. Rufus had read of it. He had never seen it used.

He would have, that day.

Calm, patient, pale, Augustus Starrise waited for him to finish his inspection. Then he inclined his head.

“Old friend,” he said. “Where are your witnesses?”

Rufus motioned back with his head, to Kingsley. “One behind me,” he said, and heard the rustle as all the birds leaned
forward intently. “Kingsley Shacklebolt is an Auror and a servant of a Light Lord.” He felt Kingsley start, badly, and was glad that he had learned to keep a smile off his face. “Does he pass your inspection?”

“Rather well,” said Augustus. “This is the first of my witnesses.” He reached out a hand, and summoned forth a pale young man who had been standing in the shadow of the trumpet-shaped flowers. Bells tinkled softly in one braid of his hair as he moved. Augustus smiled sharply. “This is my nephew and heir, Pharos Starrise. Does he pass your inspection?”

Rufus studied Pharos, and had to admire Augustus’s cunning. This was Alba’s son; every line of his face proclaimed it. “Rather well,” he admitted. “My second witness is Percy Weasley.”

Percy had been huddling in a corner of the courtyard as if he hoped he wouldn’t be noticed. Now, he shuffled forward, head lowered. He flinched when Augustus looked towards him.

“Percy is the acknowledged son of a Light pureblood family,” Rufus said calmly. “Does he pass your inspection?”

Augustus nodded. “I know the Weasleys,” he said. “I would not have expected to find one of them working under you, Rufus.”

Rufus simply arched his brows and said nothing. Technically, Percy wasn’t supposed to be working for him, but it would take several committed wizards working through a mountain of paperwork to figure that out. “Where is your second witness, Augustus?”

Augustus bared his teeth in a smile that made him look rather like Lucius Malfoy. Rufus amused himself by considering how both of them, Light wizard and Dark, would hate to be told that. “She is all around us,” he said. “I dedicate this duel to my sister Alba, Rufus, whom I loved and whom you failed. She is with me today in our shared blood, in the blood of her son, Pharos, and in the Light that was her true and natural home.”

Rufus narrowed his eyes before he could stop himself, and felt the bracelets jangle on his wrists as his weight shifted. Low blow, Augustus. I would have given my left arm to stop her, and you know it.

Augustus smiled genially. “The terms of the Sunset Accords are strict,” he said, beginning his part of the ritual. The birds leaned forward even further. “If I lose, I must swear to withdraw all my support from Cornelius Fudge at once, and to refrain from the persecution of Dark wizards, for one year. If you lose, Rufus, you must swear to abstain from any politics, even ones in the office, and perform only your duties as Head of the Auror Office, for one year.” He tossed his head, and made his long hair, thick with bells, ring. “Your last chance to back out, Rufus.”

“I do not back away,” said Rufus, giving the correct response. “In sunlight I swore this. In the Light I will finish it.” He drew his wand.

Augustus made a low, eager sound, like a hound straining forward against the edge of a leash, and pulled out his own wand, made of some white wood that Rufus could not immediately identify. “It begins, then,” he said.

“It does,” said Rufus, and bowed. He felt Kingsley and Percy tensing behind him, and Pharos shifted a bit at his uncle’s side. Augustus’s eyes never moved from his. They were trained, confident, full of pride. He was the better dueler. The other three there—the other four, Rufus corrected himself—at least suspected it.

He and Augustus knew it.

That was why Rufus had chosen as he had. The bracelets around his wrists warmed, and then began to shed small sparkles of light. If Augustus had been looking, he would have seen and understood the message contained in those ornaments. They were not the small and flexible, nearly weightless, things that a dueler who expected to have to move fast would wear. They were heavy, made of polished platinum, and they shone like water touched by fire as Rufus gathered himself and they waited for the duel to begin.

Rufus would not use spells to incapacitate or wound. He was of the Light, and he would use a spell based on compassion and honesty. When he could, he preferred that definition of the Light. One might have to lie to get things done in the Ministry, but the truth was always better.

The birds on the walls lifted their wings and brought them down, in a rippling wave motion that traveled all around the garden.
Augustus whispered, “*Diffindo.*”

The spell went for Rufus’s wand hand. Of course it did. Rufus made no motion to defend himself as a long cut opened down the center of his palm, a thin line of blood that nevertheless hurt like blazes. He saw Augustus’s eyes widen in surprise.

Then he looked at the bracelets, finally, as they began to shine too brightly to be ignored, and the widening of his eyes changed to one of comprehension.

It was too late, though. Rufus met his gaze, and smiled, and whispered, “*Probo Memoriter Meus.*”

The blue web of the spell spun into existence, glowing and radiant. Rufus closed his eyes as it briefly lashed into place about his head, asking permission to extract the memory that he wanted to share. Rufus granted it his permission, and then the light darted away from him. He opened his eyes and watched, calmly, as it showed Augustus Starrise the vision he had to see.

All of them—and that would include the witnesses—were pulled directly into the memory, sharing Rufus’s sensations and emotions as well as the mere sight.

“*Might I please have a cup of tea?*”

Rufus could feel his heart contract. Alba Starrise’s eyes were horrified, near-broken, and she kept her head bowed, her golden hair falling around her face. He thought he might know what the Death Eaters had done to her, and if he was right—well. No one had ever said that someone need touch a witch to rape her.

“Of course, lady,” he said, the instinctive courtesies of his childhood springing to his lips. He had taken her wand away; there was no way she could hurt herself, and this small, barren green room was cheerless enough without refusing her simple request. “I’ll bring it immediately.”

He left the room with a determined stride, wincing only a little as his bad leg made contact with the ground. Normally he would have sent one of the trainees and stayed with Alba himself, but they were all dealing with the aftermath of the Death Eaters’ latest attack. Voldemort had been in a fine good mood tonight, Rufus thought sourly, almost as though he were preparing something special for the following nights.

They had done well, though. They’d rescued Alba, and several other witches and wizards who had been prisoners of the Death Eaters for days. Now the hard work could really begin: the healing of the memories that had made Alba Starrise’s eyes look like that.

It was the work of three minutes for Rufus to find a cup, to heat the tea with a quickly murmured spell, and to return to the room.

And it had been the work of three minutes for Alba Starrise to string one of the banners congratulating some past Auror hero around her neck, tie one end to a ceiling beam and another around her neck, climb up on the low bed where she’d been sitting, and jump off.

Rufus knew that he didn’t hear her neck break, but he thought he could hear it all the same, echoing and re-echoing in his ears like the sound of his own guilt, or the teacup shattering on the floor. He stared at her, and stared. It was long moments before one of the other Aurors found him and led him away, a few instants more before someone thought to sever the banner with a hex and levitate Alba’s body gently to the ground.

Rufus had gone straight back out to hunt Death Eaters, gripped in the fury of his rage and his helplessness. When Voldemort fell before the Boy-Who-Lived the next night, he was not sure if he was relieved or not. Yes, the Dark Lord and his evil were gone from the world, but Rufus did not feel that justice for Alba Starrise was done.

He learned, slowly and painfully, over the next few years, that there was little justice one could do for the dead.

Rufus blinked his eyes and stepped back slightly as the memory came to an end. “Little justice for the dead,” he whispered, so as to echo the thought aloud, and lifted his eyes back to Augustus Starrise’s. “But much justice for the living. So long as someone is alive, and I can help, I will do justice by them.”

The Light wizard stared at him, eyes wide and breath coming in heaves. The white birds on the walls were utterly still and silent.
“Diffindo,” Augustus Starrise said again, but the spell was weak and almost without strength. Rufus bore the small cut across his hand, and spoke his second spell gently.

“Petrificus Totalus.”

Augustus Starrise, still weak from seeing his beloved sister’s death play out before him, in such a fashion that he could not doubt the wizard he had blamed for it felt his failure keen as a dagger to the heart, fell to the ground.

Rufus came forward and knelt down in front of Augustus, as the white birds raised their wings and then lowered them again. “I am sorry, Augustus, that I had to make you see that,” he whispered. “But it is done now.” He moved back into the words of the ritual. “Under the Light, by the Light, in the Light, may our dances be concluded. First step to you, Augustus Starrise, and last to me.” He paused and released the spell, waiting for Augustus to give the token protest he still could at this stage, even if just with his eyes, but nothing happened. Rufus nodded. “You must refrain from supporting Cornelius Fudge and persecuting Dark wizards for a year, as you swore.

“Go in peace,” he added, and turned away.

He had nearly reached the end of the garden when Augustus’s voice whispered behind him, “Rufus.”

“Yes?” Rufus turned. The heavy bracelets still shone, sunlight-like, on his wrists, and Augustus winced. Rufus shook his sleeves over them to dim them as much as possible. They had proclaimed his pure intentions, but the duel was over now and they might rest.

“Do you know who they were?” Augustus whispered. “Who the Death Eaters were that did that to my sister?”

Rufus closed his eyes. He has not learned after all, then. “No,” he said quietly. “And I would not let you know their names even if I uncovered evidence of them, Augustus.”

“What?” The Starrise wizard’s voice was anguished. The bells in his hair clashed and jangled as he scrambled to his feet. “How can you say that? You felt pain when she died, I know you did—“

“But I could invoke—“

“It’s been thirteen years, Augustus.” Rufus made his voice as gentle as possible, but he thought some of his disgust got across anyway, from the way Augustus promptly shut his mouth. “Shouldn’t you let her rest?”

He turned away before he heard anything else, and made his way out of the dueling courtyard, back towards the lift. The white birds were already gone, and the Light magic was fading, leaving him in the ordinary, complicated, mixed and muted world, once again.

Where I’ve won a duel, and Amelia will soon announce that the Wizengamot will consider a vote of no confidence against Fudge.

He still felt hollow, though, as if he had descended a mountain, and inside his head there was a roaring quiet.

******

“Harry? Come on, Harry.”

Harry rolled his eyes and let Draco drag him away from the celebrating Slytherins by one hand. At least he’d waited until an hour into the party. That meant that the focus was now on who could balance the most empty butterbeer bottles on her head and not on the “Boy Who Saved Snape,” as they insisted on calling him. He could leave with just a few disappointed looks from Millicent. And Pansy. Oh, and Blaise. And, well, a few of the fifth-years and sixth-years, too. Harry ducked his head. Stop looking at me, he tried to shout at them silently, but just then there came a crash of breaking glass, and all focus went back where it should be. Harry let out a little sigh of relief and shut the door of the fourth-year boys’ room behind them, then turned to look inquiringly at Draco.
Draco was already digging the potions book out of his trunk. He turned to face Harry, and his eyes were solemn.

“I decided to tell you more,” he said. “You’ve been a really good help to me, Harry, and you haven’t asked silly questions. You should get to know.”

Harry bowed his head, feeling honored. “All right, Draco. What did you want to tell me?”

Draco bounced onto his bed and opened the potions book. At once, a tingling wave of magic flooded the room, and Harry saw the web on Draco’s head swell and pulse like a spider eating flies. He squinted at it. Yes, the book caused the web, I’d swear it. And it probably didn’t show up before now because Draco wasn’t willingly telling me what he’d done. Now that he is, the book’s magic is interacting with the web in some way.

I don’t like that web. I really don’t like it.

“See,” Draco was saying, pointing to a recipe that Harry had to crawl onto the bed behind him to see, “this is the recipe that I wanted. It shows me how to call up an ancestor’s ghost and become a magical heir of him or her, as long as our souls are in sympathy and I can inherit the magic.” He beamed at Harry. “That means that Father would acknowledge me as a Malfoy magical heir, too.”

Harry fought to keep from snarling at the page. He didn’t like the book, either, now that he’d almost confirmed his suspicion that it had put the web on Draco. He was still sure that Snape couldn’t have known what it did, though, because Snape wouldn’t put webs on people. He’d known slavery too intimately. But he had a lot to answer for, just giving this book to Draco when he asked.

“Why is it so important that you be a magical heir?” Harry asked, reaching out to trace one line of the recipe with his finger. Now that he could see the full complexity of the thing, and what kind of research it would require, Draco’s quickness in getting ready to brew the potion astonished him anew. Draco was not often that…dedicated. Intelligent, yes, passionate, yes, but not this driven.

The page trembled before his finger touched it, and seemed as if it might turn on its own. Harry jerked his hand back. Draco didn’t seem to notice.

“Because, Harry,” he said softly, his eyes downcast, “I have to be a magical heir to be considered for some of the best advantages in pureblood society. To be a business partner, for example, or to receive some gifts, or to participate in some rituals and meetings. Even the alliance meeting that we had, with you in the Ministry, which the Parkinsons and the Bulstrodes attended? I couldn’t have attended that if someone really wanted to make a fuss about the rules. My father is just always saying that I’ll manifest sympathy with his soul sometime soon, but I’m getting older, and I don’t think I’m his magical heir.” He lifted his eyes, and sought out Harry’s. “Do you understand? This is—this is really important to me. I want to know that I’m not below anyone else. I want to know that I have the power to defend myself if someone attacks me, and to defend the people I care about. I know that you might not get it, because you’re Lord-powerful and always have been, but I really, really want this.” He bowed his head again, and all but huddled around the book. “This is the only chance I can think of.”

“Draco,” Harry whispered, and, tentatively, knowing that Draco might lash out at him again in the mood he was in, put his arms around him. It was easier than he expected, since he was sitting directly behind his friend. Draco turned his head sharply to the side, burrowing into Harry’s chest. Harry tensed, then forced himself to relax, muscle by muscle.

It’s all right that I can’t spring to my feet and move about quickly, he reassured himself. Nothing’s going to attack me here.

He concentrated on pouring strength and comfort down his arms to Draco, without using his magic. Draco kept silent, and so Harry ventured at last, “And you want to be equal to me.”

“Yeah,” Draco whispered. “That’s why I’m really hoping that Julia Malfoy was a Lady, Harry. You shouldn’t always be protecting me. I want to be able to protect you sometimes, too, you know?”

“Oh, Draco,” said Harry, stung by the injustice of that comment. “You have protected me. Last year, when Connor was tearing me apart, and the year before that, when you went with me into the Chamber, and—“

“That’s not enough,” Draco said, with a stubborn tilt to his chin that Harry knew only too well. “I want to be able to at least match you, Harry. Picking up the pieces when you come back broken, or just blacking out in the Chamber and not seeing the whole fight—that’s not enough anymore. I can be with you like that, but not stand with you. I really, really want to fight at
Harry closed his eyes. Draco was right; he hadn’t considered that angle of it. He’d seen only Draco’s possessiveness, not the fact that Draco had this intense loyalty that could only be eased by the ability to protect someone else. And it was true that he didn’t consider that much. Moving in the midst of his own magic, sheltered and cradled by it, he tended to forget that other wizards couldn’t do everything he could, or he thought he could do it for them. But why shouldn’t they have the ability, not only to make their own decisions, but to enact those decisions?

Harry opened one eye and looked at the pulsing black-silver compulsion again. *I can think of one reason why.*

But if the compulsion was attached to the damn book, and the damn potion recipe, it should go away when Draco finished the damn potion.

Harry nodded. “I’ll help you all I can, Draco,” he whispered. “We’ll have that potion finished by Halloween, I promise.”

Draco gave a sound that might have been a sigh or a sob or even a gasp of happy contentment, and turned fully to face Harry, though he didn’t hug him; he kept his arms around the potions book. “Thank you, Harry,” he whispered. “Oh, Merlin, I missed you.”

Harry opened his mouth to question what that meant, then shut it again. They *had* been distant from each other—more distant than Draco knew, since there was a lot Harry hadn’t been telling him.

Harry did want to be close again, if he could. The sudden rush of longing reminded him of the way he’d felt when he realized the path might be open to a closer relationship with Connor once more.

“I missed you, too,” he said.

Draco beamed at him, and, miracle of miracles, for the rest of the evening, was willing to talk professional Quidditch and how dare Professor Flitwick assign so much homework, rather than the damn potion. Harry lay close by his side, and commented back to him, and watched the web twitch and squirm. It seemed to be aware of him now, and to try to avoid his gaze without abandoning its hold on Draco’s head and shoulders.

*I know what you are,* Harry thought, and hoped it was loud enough to be heard. *I’m going to tear you apart for messing with my best friend.*

******

*Harry dreamed.*

He knew at once it was a dream, thanks to the odd darkness, and the sharp, clear sounds around him, and the fact that the floor was solid under his—

Feet?

Harry glanced rapidly down at himself, which didn’t help, because it was dark. He could tell he was in a different body than the one he was used to, though, something mid-size and four-legged. Luckily, as he crept towards the flickering firelight and the low sound of voices, he walked silently, too.

He froze, bristling, at the edge of the firelight. He recognized one voice. High and cold, Voldemort’s tones were impossible to forget.

“Everything is in place, Evan?”

“Yes, my Lord,” said the Death Eater, sounding cheerful. “Your return to Britain is awaited with great interest by your loyal subjects, whose ranks are growing by the day. Fenrir Greyback is a—most useful tool.”

Harry shifted to the side, trying to see. As if the movement had realigned his perception of the room, he realized abruptly that he was outdoors, and the thick darkness around him came from immense tree trunks. The firelight was burning in a clearing among the trees. Harry’s nose twitched at the smells that assaulted it, but he didn’t let himself become distracted from the people he could finally locate.
Voldemort’s voice was coming from what looked like a tiny throne, cradled in the coils of an enormous snake. *Nagini*, Harry realized, and stayed quite still, just in case she sensed him.

Could she, though? Harry knew this was a dream, or perhaps a vision.

Harry couldn’t see Voldemort himself, and did not try, now that he had seen Nagini. He watched Rosier instead, who stood in front of the throne, just recovering from a sweeping bow.

“And what of those who were once mine?” Voldemort asked, his voice deepening with displeasure. Harry felt his forehead begin to burn. “Those who were once loyal, but have now turned against me?”

“They remain turned, Lord,” said Rosier, not looking all that sorry for it. “Alas.”

“You displease me,” said Voldemort. “Bellatrix!”

A shadow shifted to the side, and the woman Harry had last seen attacking Cho Chang came limping forward. Her right arm was still a ruin, but she held a wand in her left hand.

“Torture him,” said Voldemort, sounding bored.

Bellatrix flicked her wand, and Rosier went down under *Crucio*. He writhed and struggled and gasped with the pain, of course. It took Harry a moment to identify the odd sound in the midst of the gasping, and when he did, he put his ears back. Rosier was *laughing*.

“I have passed from the outermost portal,” he said, somehow, around the convulsions, “to the shrine where a sin is a prayer. What care though the service be mortal?” He rolled over and lay there, smiling up at Bellatrix, resisting the pain that was clearly running through him. “O our Lady of Torture,” he whispered, “what care?”

Bellatrix sneered at him. “You’ve gone mad, Evan,” she said.

“Ah beautiful passionate body,” Rosier said, his eyes lingering over her right arm, “that never has ached with a heart!”

Bellatrix glanced at the throne, and then stopped the spell with a jerk. Rosier lay where he was for a moment, trembling, then lifted a hand to wipe the flecks of foam from his lips. Harry did not know if he was relieved or not to see blood among the spittle. “But as sweet as the rind was the core is,” he whispered. “We are fain of thee still, we are fain.”

“I am sending you to negotiate with the giants, Evan,” said Voldemort, sounding almost bored. “See that you do not fail me. They still think that I am their vates, and should listen to you most eagerly.”

Rosier inclined his head to Voldemort and stood, recovering faster than Harry thought was normal. He smiled at Bellatrix. “My Lord. Our Lady of Pain,” he said. “Until next time.” He bowed and limped off into the woods.

“What now, my lord?” Bellatrix’s voice was unhappy, resigned, and she sat down in front of the throne, Nagini shifting out of the way with a hiss of protest.

“What now,” said Voldemort, “we wait on the sun.” He laughed, a sound that Harry had no desire to hear, ever again. “And be glad that a certain troublesome one, bound by blood to you, who was interfering with me and niggling at me, has been laid to rest.”

He started laughing again, and the pain in Harry’s scar grew so overwhelming that he woke with a gasp.

He found himself still in Draco’s bed, fallen asleep half-curled around his friend. He backed away, slowly, and Draco mumbled drowsily and rolled over, clutching the potions book. Harry swallowed, and put a hand to his forehead. It came away covered with blood, of course.

*I will send a message to Narcissa*, he decided, as he padded off towards the loo. *This weekend, we must go to Grimmauld Place, and find Regulus, if we can.*

“Will you take us with you?”
Harry jumped and looked down at a movement near his feet. The Many—or one snake of the Many; Harry suspected it was not the same one that had accompanied him so far, since that one had grown tired of the distance from its hive and gone back to the Forest—lifted its head and regarded him with bright eyes. Harry knelt so that it could slither up his arm. The small tongue flicked out and tasted the blood on his scar, a sensation that made Harry shiver.

“If you want to go,” he whispered, and set about washing the blood off his forehead. His face was pale and solemn in the mirror, weary and streaked with fatigue and pain.

*I could use some help, really. Voldemort coming back to Britain. And the giants! What do I do about them? And what is this nonsense he keeps babbling about the sun?*

Harry fought the temptation to put his head against the wall and just keep it there for a while. Sometimes, he wondered why he should have to be the one to do this.

*Because there is no one else, he told himself sternly, and straightened. Not yet, at least. Connor might be the prophesied defeater of Voldemort, but no one else is vates, and no one else receives warnings of the Dark Lord like you do.*

*Grow up, Harry. Stand firm. This is necessary, it always has been, and accepting help isn’t the same thing as abandoning your duty.*

Harry washed the blood off his scar, brushed his teeth, and went to bed.

~*~*~*~*~*

**Chapter Twenty-Four: Open Unto Me**

Minerva closed her eyes and bowed her head. It was the only weakness she would allow herself, these five minutes alone in her office, before she had to stand and go down to face the students in the Great Hall on a Saturday morning near the end of October.

The days of the week and the names of the months had—not mattered to her so much lately. Oh, she had taught the right lesson plans on the right days and known when school started. She had to give herself that much credit. She hadn’t been so distracted that she couldn’t concentrate.

But things had been disordered ever since three of her pureblood, seventh-year Gryffindors had come to her and confessed that their families were being “recruited” by Fenrir Greyback.

Minerva brushed her hair wearily out of her eyes and stood. The five minutes were almost gone. She could afford to relax now, in one sense, because her students’ friends had come flying to her that morning with the news that each one of them was missing from his or her bed. They had brought the notes pinned to their pillows, each addressed to her.

All of them were the same.

*I’m sorry.*

She had failed—failed to convince them to stay, failed to convince them to bring their families to the sanctuary of Hogwarts, failed to convince them not to retreat and “stay neutral.” Voldemort had slaughtered the supposedly neutral pureblood families in the last war. It was a path that would only lead them to darkness in the end.

She had told them that, and they had seemed to consider it. Minerva had been sure that she was winning all of them slowly back towards the Light, to some consideration beyond what might happen to their families at the next full moon after their first open gesture of defiance.

And now they were gone, and she had failed.

Minerva shook her head and left her office, her steps brisk. Yes, she had failed, just as she had had all those years ago when Sirius Black tried to kill Severus. And she would deal with it now as she had then: growing over the wound and going on. There was nothing else to be done. When the music played, she must dance the dance that it signaled, not the one that played in her head.

She had told Albus of her failure already, before going to her office to grieve in private. He had sighed, and patted her head,
and murmured some platitude about it not being her fault.

Minerva did not believe that. She was their Head of House, and yet she could not wake them enough from the blind haze of fear that they would see reality.

Yet, while she could blame herself and grieve, she saw no point in brooding on it for long. She would face the consequences, and one of them was tightening her watch over her remaining students. If one of them was in trouble, she intended to notice it before it reached the point where they would flee home in sudden cowardice.

She paused when she heard brisk footsteps coming through Hogwarts’s front doors. They were too light to be Hagrid’s or Sprout’s, and there was no one else who had reason to be outside this early. Minerva could feel the temptation to arch her back as she would when she was a cat.

*Do they dare to come into Hogwarts itself?*

She drew her wand and stepped around the last turn of the stairs, holding it so it was clearly visible before her. Any friend deserved to have the warning, and any enemy would receive a hex full in the face.

A tall, blonde woman halted where she stood, staring at Minerva as if she were a troll. It took Minerva a moment to place where she had seen that smooth, haughty face before.

“Mrs. Malfoy,” she said calmly, never lowering her wand. “I believe that the Headmaster asked to be informed when any parent visited school grounds, whether they had come to visit their children or to remove them from Hogwarts.” She stepped off the last stair, not letting her eyes stray, either. She remembered Narcissa as an indifferent student of Transfiguration, but there was no telling what she might have learned in the years since she left school, and she had been proficient in Dark Arts, as most Slytherins of that time were.

“Professor McGonagall.” Narcissa’s voice was also calm, and if she felt the temptation to draw her own wand, it did not show in the way she held herself. “No, I am not here to see Draco, nor to take him home. As a matter of fact, I have suggested a visit to one of my family’s properties to Mr. Potter, and he has accepted.”

Minerva only narrowed her eyes. “What do you want with Harry?” she asked softly. He was another student she had not paid enough attention to in the past few weeks, involved and bound as she had been in the lives of her three hopeless cases.

“That is none of your concern, surely.” Narcissa’s eyebrows rose in an expression of polite disbelief. “He is not of your House, and I was not aware that he had formally asked you to ally with him.”

“I need not fulfill either of those circumstances to feel concern about him.” Minerva held a stinging curse just behind her lips. It was true that Narcissa Malfoy had never borne the Dark Mark, never been among the accused Death Eaters, and was, on the few other occasions that Minerva met her after she left Hogwart, a loving and devoted mother to her son. And it was true that people changed, and her husband was still Lucius Malfoy. “I am a professor, and he is my student. Tell me why you are really here. Now.”

“It’s the reason I explained,” said Narcissa. “No more than that.” She lifted her hands slightly, holding them away from her sides. “When Harry comes to meet me, ask him. It’s the best way to dispel your suspicions.”

Minerva was almost inclined to believe her then, since it would take a lot to get Harry to leave the ground with a former Death Eater’s wife, but she kept her wand steady anyway. With her grief barely behind her, it felt good to have a possible villain in front of her.

“Thank you for the invitation,” she said. “I think I will wait for Harry.”

Narcissa went still in that way only Slytherins had, as if her body had turned to nothing more than a rock casing for her brain. Minerva didn’t mind. Severus had often tried that trick with her. It hadn’t worked then, and he was better at it than Narcissa was.

*Severus.* His arrest was a bitter injustice, and now that she was free of that one overwhelming concern, Minerva thought she could spare some attention to it. Really, Albus should have done so already. The *Prophet* had reported that the Wizengamot would cast a vote to determine if they still had confidence in Fudge’s government in a few weeks. That alone should have suggested to Albus that the Minister might have a less than good reason to file charges against Severus.
They waited several minutes, until a pair of light footsteps came up the stairs from the Slytherin dungeons. Harry paused when he reached the top of the steps, and blinked a bit, pushing his glasses off his nose.

“Professor?” he asked. “Mrs. Malfoy? What’s the matter?”

“Mrs. Malfoy said she’d come to take you to a family property,” said Minerva, seeing no reason to mince words. “And since it’s unusual enough for a parent to visit Hogwarts grounds to see their own children, let alone to take or remove a child who is not theirs to care for—”

“Tell me,” Narcissa whispered, lowly enough that Minerva doubted Harry heard. “Who has been taking care of him?”

“—I thought I should make sure that you really did want to go with her,” said Minerva, seeing no reason to show that she’d heard, either. “Do you, Harry?”

Harry only blinked again, as if he could not fathom why it would be a matter of concern to anyone. “Of course, Professor.” He gave her a faint smile. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

Minerva simply nodded and turned to Narcissa before she put her wand away. “If he is not back by this evening,” she said, “I will find you.”

Narcissa was recovered from that Slytherin stillness now, shaking her head slightly. The smile on her lips was not a sneer only because it was too faint. “Oh, Professor,” she said. “And what would you do if you could find me?”

Minerva raised a brow. Well, perhaps she needs a reminder of what a Gryffindor is in battle. “The same thing I did to Samson Flint,” she said. “I understand they could never Transfigure him back at all.”

That wiped Narcissa’s mouth and face clean in a most satisfactory manner. Minerva turned and stalked towards the Great Hall.

She felt few qualms in letting Harry go, in truth. His magic was massive, and it was probable that Narcissa meant what she said, since she was the mother of Harry’s best friend.

And, if Harry did not return by this evening, then Minerva knew where she was going.

*Move forward. There is little use in looking back.*

******

Narcissa stared after Minerva, more unnerved than she liked to admit. *She was the one who turned Samson Flint into that—thing? His wife finally had to smother it in its sleep one night.* Narcissa permitted herself one delicate shudder, which did not bounce her bandaged arm. *I shall be careful of her, then.*

She turned to welcome Harry, cocking her head slightly so that she could study his face behind the glasses. The dark circles under his eyes were pronounced, but his lack of expression would make most people look past that. His hair hung forward—not coincidentally, Narcissa thought, blocking a view of the lightning bolt scar on his brow. His green eyes were far warier and more closed than they had been since the last time she saw him, at the end of August.

*Who has been taking care of you, child?* she thought, the sarcasm she had bounced at Minerva coming back to haunt her. *Draco’s letters have been normal, but that does not mean he has been. And with Severus gone…*

“Hello, Harry,” was what she allowed herself to say aloud. “I thought we would visit Number Twelve Grimmauld Place today, given that it is the main house, and the place where Sirius discovered the locket that possessed him.”

Harry winced and looked over his shoulder as though he thought someone was there to hear them, but faced her with a small smile and an inclination of his head. “Yes, thank you, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said. “I’d like that.” He paused, his gaze grown suddenly sharper. “Have you hurt yourself?”

Narcissa wondered what should unnerve her more: that he had apparently seen through the cloth of her robe to the wound on her arm, or that he had sensed a change in her magic that alerted him that way. She would only make it worse if she pretended nothing had happened, though. *Merlin knows that Harry needs people willing to be honest with him.*
She drew back the robe so he could see the tied-off bandage. “A few of the people I tried to dance with proved rougher partners than I had anticipated,” she said lightly.

Harry’s eyes widened, and then came back to her face. Narcissa was unprepared for the self-blame that she saw there. “Perhaps you shouldn’t do any more dances, Mrs. Malfoy,” he whispered. “I couldn’t live with myself if you lost yourself on one of the floors one night.”

Oh, no, you don’t. “I enjoy all the dances,” said Narcissa. “The stately waltz and the pavane, of course, but also the ones where I must suddenly change partners, or where I stumble and take someone’s sharp foot on mine. It keeps me busy, and it serves the purposes that I feel must be served. I would feel much worse if I always sat at home or lingered along the wall and never did any dancing.”

Harry’s face went blank, but Narcissa knew him well enough to realize he was conducting an inner debate with himself: whether he should ask her to refrain from helping him, in the face of her pointed refusal. She also knew what she was going to say, so she contented herself with studying him again. She was sure that the circles under his eyes came from exhaustion, and his posture had subtly changed since that meeting at the end of August, as had the feeling of his magic. He was more resigned, more closed-in than before, where he had radiated hope and courage. It was something that Draco’s letters had never mentioned. Of course, Draco had been obsessed with his “special surprise” lately, something that he said his parents would understand better after Halloween night, but it wasn’t like him to miss an alteration in Harry so complete. Perhaps it was a kind not visible to someone who lived with him day-to-day, though.

I was right. No one else has been taking care of him at all.

She decided that she might as well start. “I am not desisting from my dancing, Harry,” she said. “If I ever get weary of it, be assured I will let you know at once.”

Harry studied her intently for a moment more, then nodded. “Please do tell me when it happens, Mrs. Malfoy.”

When, not if. The boy does not seem to trust anyone to stand by him. Narcissa tucked the tidbit away for later, and sidestepped right into bluntness. It was a move that Harry would not expect, after their guarded conversation of before. “How have you been, Harry?”

Harry blinked a few times, then sighed and rubbed at his face. Narcissa relaxed minutely. If he would confide in her, then she would be less worried about him. He had tried desperately to hide his gaping emotional wounds when he had come to the Manor last Christmas. Letting fresh air and sunlight fall on them would mean that he was past that state.

“I’m really worried about Draco, Mrs. Malfoy,” he whispered. “He’s been researching a certain potion lately. I don’t know if he would want me to tell you all the details, but he hasn’t been sleeping that much, and he’s hinging all his happiness on the potion working. I don’t know what will happen to him if it doesn’t.” Harry stared at his hands, as if he held a vision of the future there, and it wasn’t a pretty one.

Narcissa swallowed. Draco’s letters had been odd, yes, but she had not imagined they hid something this serious. “What is the potion?” she asked. Harry gave her a considering glance. “Harry, I am his mother, and I deserve to know.”

Harry let out a windy sigh. “He really wants to become a magical heir to the Malfoy family, and he thinks he’s found a potion that can help him achieve that. I don’t know the formal name. And I don’t know if the potion’s going to work, either. It’s pretty complicated. I’ve been helping him, but I’m half-afraid that he’s setting himself up for a disappointment.”

Narcissa closed her eyes. She remembered a few other times her son had been so caught up in a grand project: learning to fly over the house, making a gift for his father’s birthday, making absolutely sure he was Sorted into Slytherin. When everything played itself out the way he wanted, he was happy. When it did not, then he was devastated.

Granted, for the last few years his obsession had been Harry Potter, and the final outcome of that project was more difficult to predict. Narcissa had been doing what she could to help, to make sure her son got what he wanted. But could she help with the potion?

“I’d like to talk to him, Harry, if you don’t mind,” she said. “Just for a few minutes before we leave.”

Harry nodded to her. “Of course, Mrs. Malfoy. I hope you might be able to talk some sense into him. He’s in the library already.” He did her the courtesy of leading her up the stairs, though she remembered perfectly well from her years here where the Hogwarts library was.
Narcissa found her son surrounded by books and parchments, and with the look that she recognized on his face. She spoke with him, and he gave her all the expected answers, after a few fierce glares at Harry for giving the game away. No, he didn’t want to tell her all the ramifications of the potion yet. Yes, he was sure it would work. Yes, Harry had been helping him.

No, he would not use it on Halloween night if she really didn’t want him to.

He sulked all through that part of the promise, but Narcissa flattered herself that she knew him better than anyone in the world, and she knew when he finally muttered the words and threw his quill down on the table that he meant what he said. She kissed his forehead and left the school with Harry to Apparate them to London, secure in her mind about her son again.

Something did niggle at her in the back of her mind, though, and went on wearing and bothering her until that evening, when she had come back from Grimmauld Place shaken, and had leisure to figure it out.

Harry had rather deftly turned the conversation away from himself, got her to worry about Draco, and prevented her from asking more extensive questions about how he had been, all in one go.

*******

“I don’t know how we’re going to get through the wards,” said Narcissa softly. “You’re absolutely sure that Regulus has not contacted you since the evening when he vanished?”

Harry nodded, and returned to studying the house in front of them. Number Twelve Grimmauld Place looked little different from all the other houses, really, Harry thought: broken windows, grimy walls, a knocker on the door. He had to squint sideways to see the shimmer of the silver wards, thick and unbroken, around those walls and windows, and that the knocker was made of silver and in the shape of a serpent coiled back on itself.

“If Regulus is dead, finally and forever,” Narcissa whispered, “then the ownership has fallen to Bellatrix.” She grimaced and slipped her wand into her palm. “I would prefer not to run into her.”

“I would, too,” said Harry. “She’d probably want her hand back, and she has a new wand.”

He didn’t realize what he was saying until Narcissa turned and gave him a sharp glance. “And how do you know that, Mr. Potter?” she whispered.

Harry shrugged. “Well, I was the one who cut off her hand,” he said, playing for time. That had been in the *Daily Prophet*, too. Narcissa’s stare only sharpened. Harry reached for and found a plausible lie, since the visions were no one’s business but his own. “And Professor Moody said that she would get a new wand as soon as she could, even though she left her old one at Hogwarts. A Death Eater and a Dark witch wouldn’t go long without a wand, he said.”

Narcissa sighed, but seemed to accept his story, to Harry’s vast relief. “A pity the Aurors did not think to watch Ollivander’s,” she murmured, and then stepped forward. “My name is Narcissa Black Malfoy,” she said. She had not raised her voice far, but it carried well. Harry glanced at the Muggle houses, and hoped their owners were away for the morning, or still asleep. “I have visited this house as a child and an adult, both. I am friendly to the current heir, Regulus Black. I ask for permission to enter.” She extended her wand towards the wards.

The wards waited until Narcissa’s fingers were only a few inches from them, and then formed a silvery pair of jaws and lunged at her. Narcissa pulled her hand away, her mouth thinning. Harry thought that only good manners kept her from trying to hex the house, even as the wards fell back into place and gave a little snarl. She glanced at Harry and shook her head slightly.

“I cannot tell what that means,” she said. “Either Regulus has not had time to lower the wards, or he is dead and the current heir does not wish me to enter the house.”

Harry nodded. He decided that it was worth a try for him. Regulus had trusted him more than Narcissa. Perhaps he had keyed the wards to fall in the last extremity, if something happened to snatch him out of Harry’s head.

Harry drew his own cypress wand from his pocket and took a few steps in front of Narcissa. “My name is Harry Potter,” he told the wards, and the house, and whatever else was listening. “I am no relation by blood, but I am friendly with Regulus Black, and I was Sirius Black’s godson.” It was a risk mentioning Sirius, but he had worked spells that had convinced the house and even its house elf to accept him as true master. “Has Regulus left any message within you?”
The wards surged, then flowed out and over him, encasing him in a silvery skin before Harry could do more than blink. He heard Narcissa’s startled cry, and then he heard nothing but—

Music.

The song moved around him, slow and thick and sluggish at first, but becoming faster as the wards flickered over his body. Harry held still and tried to breathe as shallowly as he could. The sensation was rather like being underwater, save that it affected his mind, too. His thoughts quickened, until they seemed to race around his head, and he heard the song coming from several hundred frenzied throats at once.

The wards must have found whatever it was they were looking for. They gave a final loud note, a twitch, and a twist, and fell away, leaving a hole just large enough for him to enter, and Narcissa if she ducked.

Harry swallowed and looked back at her. “I—I don’t know what I did, but I think we’re invited inside,” he said, a bit lamely.

Narcissa narrowed her eyes, and she nodded. “Regulus must have left a hole for you,” she said, edging nearer as if she expected the wards to attack any moment. They did not, only humming to themselves. Narcissa ducked through swiftly anyway, then shook her head and glanced back at Harry. “Come on,” she said. “They may not permit us inside for long. If necessary, I can use a Portkey to take us back to Malfoy Manor from within the house, but we must open the front door first.”

Harry nodded, and hastily followed her down the half-broken walkway. The black door opened as they approached it, and Harry heard a deep, distant thrill of music again.

“Why do the wards sing, Mrs. Malfoy?” he asked.

She glanced back at him in surprise, tearing her eyes from whatever inside the house had occupied her attention. “I have never been aware of them doing so, Harry.”

Harry swallowed and decided to ignore the teasing little thread of song that followed him as he stepped inside the house. Regulus probably did have something to do with this. Narcissa had said that the wards were tight enough to prevent anyone from entering the house whom the true Black heir did not want in here. How else could they have fallen, if Regulus hadn’t told them to allow Harry in?

That doesn’t explain the singing, or why Narcissa could come with you.

Harry ignored the thought, and took in the sight in front of him. The entrance hall had most definitely seen better days. The wallpaper yearned in curling strips towards the floor, itself covered with a carpet which had stronger cousins in spiderwebs. Gas lamps flickered here and there, and filled the hall with as much shadow as light. There was a candelabra made as a serpent—a sight that Harry ordinarily wouldn’t have minded, since, after all, he carried a snake on his arm, but this one had been shaped, by some art to the head and the neck, to look as malevolent as possible.

Portraits hung on the walls, all of them of past Blacks. A pair of curtains hid what Harry knew would be a portrait of Sirius’s and Regulus’s mother. Sirius had mentioned her a time or two, always with a bitter twist to his lips when he spoke. Knowing, now, how she had abused Sirius, Harry wasn’t surprised.

“Move quietly,” Narcissa breathed. “Aunt Capella tends to scream about blood traitors in the house, whether there actually are or—”

“FILTH! BLOOD TRAITORS!” came from behind the curtains.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, Sirius told me about her,” he said dryly. He glanced at the curtains, and wondered if it was worth the effort of opening them. Probably not, he thought. They could cast a Silencio and hold it there, and then she wouldn’t disturb them or cover any cry for help that Regulus might make.

He aimed his wand and started to concentrate on the incantation, but almost at once, Capella Black’s screams ceased. Harry stared, and blinked. He glanced at Narcissa, who looked as mystified as he had.

Then the portrait’s voice started again, low and sly and sounding as if she were talking to herself. “Of course, I should have known. Dark magic, sweet and powerful. They would not have sent someone into the house who did not smell of Dark magic, powerful and sweet.”
Harry swallowed. He didn’t want to think of what that might mean, that he had used so much Dark magic that a witch who sympathized with the Death Eaters thought he smelled good.

Narcissa patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry about it,” she whispered. “Aunt Capella was mad before the end. Let’s just be grateful that she’s not disturbing us, and get on with the work.” She turned towards the looming staircase. “I know the place to go first, which should tell us whether or not Regulus is still alive.”

Harry nodded and followed her, though a time or two he glanced back towards the portrait. Capella Black was laughing.

Harry heard a trill of music again, deep and self-satisfied as the laughter.

He shuddered, then tried not to worry about it.

******

“Yes,” said Narcissa softly, stepping away from the tapestry and gesturing for Harry to move closer so that he could see for himself. “He is still alive.”

Harry felt the breath rush out of him as he gazed at the tapestry. It displayed the names of the Black descendants in a twining tree, with the motto *Toujours pur* at the top. Under Capella and Canopus lay the names of Sirius and Regulus. Sirius’s name was in faded thread, Regulus’s in brilliant silver.

He glanced at the other side of the cloth, and nodded when he saw that the names of Bellatrix Black Lestrange and Narcissa Black Malfoy were also silver, as were the names of Lucius and Draco. In between Bellatrix and Narcissa was what looked like a blasted bit of cloth. Harry raised his eyebrows at Narcissa.

Narcissa’s smile was small and tight. “Aunt Capella didn’t approve of Andromeda marrying Ted Tonks,” she murmured. “And, really, Sirius shouldn’t have been on this tapestry, either. It was only the magic he worked that made the house consider him as heir.” She shook her head and turned away. “We know that Regulus is alive now, but I don’t suppose you have any idea on how to find him, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “He always told me his body was somewhere small and dark, and that he felt shut in. He had preservation spells cast on him, probably, to prevent him from feeling hunger and thirst, and he’d been through a lot of pain.”

Narcissa half-closed her eyes. “I know most of the hiding places in this house,” she said, and drew a piece of parchment from her robes, along with a quill. She scribed several dozen lines down on the parchment, then tore it in half and gave the lower part to Harry. “We’ll have to split up, or we’ll never get through all the hiding places. And I don’t know if the wards will ever let us in again, so it makes sense to do all our searching at once.”

Harry nodded. It *did* make sense. Merlin knew that he wanted to find Regulus, now that he knew he was still alive. “There are Dark creatures living in here, aren’t there?” he asked.

“Yes. But I suspect you can handle them, Harry, or I would insist on accompanying you to each hiding place.” Narcissa smiled slightly, her eyes fastened on him. “Now that Kreacher is dead, none of them are so fanatically devoted to protecting our house and effects. Doxies, boggarts, ghouls…nothing worse.” She shook her head. “They should let me alone, since I’m of the Black blood, and the security measures wouldn’t permit anything very dangerous inside.”

“We can bite anything that threatens you,” the Many volunteered from his arm. “Tell her that.”

Harry just shook his head, because the Many wanted to bite everything sooner or later, and studied his list. *Second closet from the top of the staircase on the uppermost floor, secret door under the bookshelves in the library, compartment under the turning chair in the library…*

“Call for help, of course, Harry, if you find something you can’t handle,” Narcissa continued, drawing his attention back to her. “And I will do the same thing.”

Harry relaxed a bit. She was evidently trusting him to act like an adult. That made him happy, since it meant she was less likely to question him about things he didn’t want her to question him about on the assumption that he couldn’t take care of himself.
“I will, Mrs. Malfoy,” he agreed, and went to go hunt out the library, as five of the hiding places on his list concerned it.

*******

Harry shook his head and pulled out of the compartment in the floor. The turning chair settled back into place over it with a small grinding noise the moment Harry stood up again. It would have made an excellent hiding place for Regulus, Harry reflected, if Regulus were no more than six inches long and five wide. Narcissa had been good to her word about listing all the small and secret places in the house, though.

Harry looked thoughtfully around the room. Maybe I’ve gone about this wrong. I’m not surprised that Regulus can’t answer us when we call, and I’m not finding anything by peering into every hidden corner. Maybe I can sense his magic.

He concentrated, and then staggered back and sat down hard in the chair. The library was blazing with Dark magic of every stripe, several dozen nasty spells and curses waiting for anyone who tried to remove a book from the room, dirty the chair cushions, enter when they were Muggleborn, or tear pages.

Harry was even more uneasy about the blaze of spells that he didn’t recognize.

He stood up, swiping dust from his robes, and then paused, turning his head. The music was back again, and this time it came from a different direction, beyond the library door. Harry moved towards it, stepping carefully over the low-running vines and stripes of curses.

The music increased in pitch and volume, as if the singer could feel him coming. Beyond the library was another staircase upward, barely lit at all. Harry remembered that he needed to check out the second closet from the top of it on the uppermost floor, anyway, and climbed. His feet hardly seemed to make a sound. The singing vibrated in his bones and curled around his waist like a cord, tugging him forward. He did remember to whisper a *Lumos* charm so that he could see where he was going.

The melody come from the second closet from the top of the staircase. Harry experienced a brief moment of amusement, and then one of hope. Perhaps Regulus was making the sound, and that was why the wards had sung when they fell in front of him. Harry had not dared hope that finding him would be this easy.

Then the music picked up again, and Harry felt those concerns torn from him as though they were clouds in a windy sky. The song was quite beautiful enough on its own, ringing again and again with the tones of struck silver. It sobbed and warbled and dipped, and Harry could hear intense sorrow in it, as well as the coaxing beauty.

He laid a hand on the closet door. The lines of many spells crisscrossed it. They were all binding spells. Of course they were, Harry thought, somewhere hazily, beyond the song, in the part of his brain not consumed with it. Some Black in the past had really, really not wanted this door to be opened.

Or perhaps it was Voldemort. Regulus could still be in there.

A noise clashed with the song, mingled with it, and welled into his ears. Harry could hear a soft clicking sound from beyond the door. He concentrated, and decided that it came from many pairs of legs.

The song fell away, and left a voice behind.

*Let me out.*

Harry blinked. Well, he could do it, couldn’t he? Of course he could. He was the *vates*, and this sounded like a confined magical creature. And though the binding spells on the door were quite complex, he could release a blast of magic, or even draw on the magic of the spells around him, and release them that way.

The voice whispered, tense and excited.

*Not that way. It must be Dark magic or nothing.*

Harry blinked again, then nodded. Of course it must be. This was a Dark creature of some kind, imprisoned in a Dark house. And Capella Black had stopped screaming when she sensed Harry’s Dark power. It only made sense.

He stepped away from the door. The creature gave a low, eager bubbling sound, and then started singing again.
“Harry, stop!”

Harry had jumped and turned to face Narcissa before he realized what he was doing. She held up her hands at once, even dropping her own wand to the floor with a flick. Her blue eyes were wide, looking like smudged pale shadows in her equally pale face.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “I should not have written that hiding place down, Harry. It was in use during my childhood, but Uncle Canopus confined something there the year that Sirius ran away. He died from the wounds it gave him, in the end. Do not undo the binding spells. I do not think that anything could stop it once it was released.”

“I’m a powerful wizard,” said Harry. The song was in his mind, and it made everything make sense. “It’s confined, and it would be grateful for its freedom, anyway. It wouldn’t hurt me.”

Narcissa shook her head. “Uncle Canopus confined it only because he was magically average, Harry,” she said, slowly, softly, taking soft and slow steps towards him. “It fed on the powerful wizards it found before him. That’s why it can get to you, Harry. It’s not singing at me. It doesn’t want me.”

*Let me out,* the voice said, and the music fell away.

The creature had misjudged, Harry knew a moment later. The sudden loss of the song combined with Narcissa’s words to tear his mind out of the confining fog it had been in. He took a step back, his breathing loud and harsh in the silence. He shuddered.

*Well, that’s the first time a magical creature has tried to compel me into breaking its web.*

*And I am not a blind vates. I cannot charge into freeing this thing until I know what it is, and what it would cost to have it free.*

“What are you?” he asked aloud.

*It does not matter. Let me out.*

Harry shook his head. “I think it matters,” he muttered. He could not believe how stupid he had almost been. He looked at Narcissa. “Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said. “Where else should we look for Regulus?”

Narcissa sighed. “I’ve cast all the spells I can think of, Harry, spells that should have revealed the presence of human flesh and blood anywhere in the house. It only showed me and you. Regulus isn’t here. At least, his body isn’t here.”

“But we have to find him,” said Harry. “If we don’t—“

Narcissa gently closed a hand on his shoulder. “There are other Black estates.”

“But we don’t know if the wards will let us into them.” Harry couldn’t understand why Narcissa kept holding his shoulder and looking at him with such concern in her eyes. “At least we’re inside this house now, and we can look other places. Maybe Voldemort laid a spell to confound the ones you used.”

Narcissa smiled thinly. “I used several that only the Black family knows,” she said. “The Dark Lord is powerful, was powerful, but even he is limited by his knowledge.”

“Regulus could have betrayed them to him. Just let me open this door—“

“*Harry.*” Narcissa’s hand pressed down firmly. “The creature’s song is starting to snare you again.”

Harry gave a guilty start, and winced when he realized what he had said. “You want to get me away from here,” he said quietly.

Narcissa nodded, and glared at the door. Harry didn’t look himself, too afraid it would turn into a longing stare. “I do not believe, now, that the Dark Lord brought Regulus’s body here, in any case,” she said. “The creature would have tried to feed on him in turn.”

“Maybe he was strong enough to escape.”
Narcissa shook her head. “The stronger you are, the mightier a hold the creature has on you,” she said.

“Maybe some of his Death Eaters rescued him.”

Narcissa knelt down in front of Harry, clasping his shoulders. “I want you out of here, and now,” she said. “It is not quite evening, but we can look again later, Harry. The wards will probably let us in again, now that they have once. And even if they don’t,” she added, anticipating Harry’s next response, “I would still rather have you safe than Regulus found immediately. You can’t sense him, and he is alive. That might mean he is not in pain, that the Dark Lord has simply blocked him from reaching you somehow.”

Harry closed his eyes and fought down the compulsion to stay. When he looked, he could feel the subtle strands of the song wound about him, and he plucked and tore them from him with disgust.

He might have stepped from full darkness into full sunshine. Abruptly, he wanted nothing so much as to be outside the walls of the house. He shivered, opened his eyes, and nodded to Narcissa.

“Let’s go.”

Narcissa smiled at him and escorted him away from the closet door, which Harry resolutely didn’t look back at again. They passed Capella Black’s portrait, and Harry heard her laugh. He winced, expecting an outburst of shouting, but she merely sniffed, as if drawing in a deep breath.

“You smell so good, child,” she whispered. “So strongly of the Dark.”

Harry heard a chiming trickle of music slide past his ears, as if in complement to the chuckle.

He let Narcissa take him outside and back through the hole in the wards, which mended itself seamlessly behind them. As they arranged themselves for Side Along Apparition, Harry resolutely did not look back.

I can’t just go around freeing everything the moment it asks me to do so. I’ll study and learn more about what that creature is if I can, but just unleashing it wouldn’t make me responsible, either. I have to remember that my magic is in service to many people, not just one.

He ignored the sound of song in his ears even after they had landed at Hogwarts, but he didn’t mention that to Narcissa. The tugging at his temple told him that Draco needed him, and he hurried off, grateful for a task that he could fling himself into.

Move forward. There is little use in looking back.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Light Lord’s Bargain

Harry frowned at Connor.

Connor blinked at him. “What?”

Harry gestured around the abandoned classroom—the third one they’d used for this purpose, given that neither of them wanted to go back to the room that had been the scene of several bitter fights between them, and the second classroom was now thoroughly occupied locking away Snape’s Meleager Potion. “How many people did you tell about this, anyway?”

Connor glanced back along the ranks of tables and desks, and shrugged in a way that Harry could wish was more repentant. “Well, Ron and Hermione knew already. And Ron might have mentioned something to Neville. And Ron might have mentioned something to Neville. Why do you mind? You like Neville.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Connor, half of Gryffindor House is here. And I’d say at least a quarter of Ravenclaw. And—who now?” The door had opened, and several tall students Harry didn’t know, but who wore Hufflepuff ties, had just come in. From their size, Harry guessed they were probably seventh-years.

One of them came towards him, hand held out to shake. Harry accepted it warily, less because he was afraid the boy was trying to trick him than because of the sheer strangeness of seventh-years showing up to listen to a fourth-year. This boy, at
least, had a forthright expression on his face, and gray eyes that reminded Harry of Sirius, though they were considerably less shadowed than Sirius’s had ever been.

“My name’s Cedric Diggory,” he said, and gave Harry a faint smile. “Seventh-year Hufflepuff. Hope you don’t mind, but Zacharias would not be quiet about these lessons, and it’s so rare that something impresses the little—“ He paused, and Harry could hear the considerably more impolite word that he might have put in there. “Fellow,” Cedric finished smoothly, “that I thought we should see what it’s all about.”

Harry nodded, rifling through his mental files on the Diggorys. Light family, lived not far from the Weasleys, more strongly allied to the Light than the Weasleys were. Traditionally a Hufflepuff and pureblood family, but they’d had their fair share of relatives in every House but Slytherin, and they’d intermarried with Muggleborns a few times in the last century. Harry supposed he could trust Cedric as far as he could throw him.

“Welcome, then,” he said, with a shrug. “I think that we’ll probably be covering ground that you already know, but thank you for coming.”

Cedric nodded at him, and led the group of Hufflepuffs towards the back of the room. Harry stood at he front of it, and shook off the temptation to bristle with sweat. Attention like this was understandable, because the people looking at him wanted something from him that Harry was sure he could give. He met Luna’s eyes, and saw her smiling calmly at him, as if she couldn’t conceive of him failing. He tried to meet Cho’s gaze, but saw it locked on Cedric, and what he saw in her face made him raise his eyebrows.

Oh. I wonder if Cedric has more than one reason for coming to this lesson.

“Very well,” he said aloud. “I explained about the nature of Light and Dark wizards in our lesson last time, and I don’t know what you want to hear about now.” He glanced at Hermione, whose quill was poised above her parchment. “I can continue that lesson, but—”

“Show us some spells.” That was Zacharias Smith, who was leaning back against one of the desks as though he were too important—or self-important, Harry had to admit—to actually sit down. “Unless you’re too powerful and afraid of injuring one of these pretty little babes, of course.”

“Go after Smith first,” Harry heard Ron mutter.

Harry couldn’t help smiling. “But we’re not supposed to use magic out of class,” he said, innocently, even as he let his wand fall into his hand. He wasn’t about to show everyone how easily wandless magic came to him. Let them imagine that was only for moments like the one on the Quidditch Pitch last November, when his power burst forth from him.

“That’s in the corridors,” said Hermione, more snottily than Harry had ever heard her. He realized that she must want to see some magic, too. She’d even put down her quill and leaned forward, her hands folded on the desk. “We’re in a classroom. I think you can show us magic, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “What do you want to see, offensive magic or defensive magic or—“ He cut himself off abruptly. I can’t offer to show them Dark Arts, for Merlin’s sake!

“Offensive,” said Zacharias, before anyone else could say anything. “I’ve heard that’s your weakness, and if you’re weak on the offensive, then how can you hope to lead us in battle?”

Harry raised a brow. He does pick at everyone, doesn’t he? “All right,” he said. “You’ll let me pick the spell myself, I presume?”

“You’d better, Potter,” said Zacharias. “I won’t be there in the middle of battle to tell you what to do.”

A few people chuckled at that, but more leaned forward, their eyes never wavering from Harry’s face. Harry concealed a disgusted sigh, and aimed his wand directly ahead of him. For a moment, the only offensive spells he could think of were Dark Arts, since Snape had tutored him so extensively in those the last few weeks before he went away.

Then he shook himself, and normal magic came back to him. “Speculum Ardoris!” he said clearly.

Fire burst out of the tip of his wand, more controlled than it was when he used wandless magic, since it had a container to funnel itself through. Harry found himself wondering abruptly if he could do the same thing with that wandless magic, using
his body as a container.

Then he had to work on controlling the spell, which tended to wander in strips of flame if he didn't watch out. He wove dazzling mirrors in front of each student's face, enough to cause some of them to draw their wands and even shoot out a mild jinx or two. The flame mirrors bounced them right back, and several people fell unconscious before Harry dismissed the spell.

Zacharias regarded him with dispassionate eyes as Harry revived a girl knocked down by her own deflected Stunning Spell. “I thought that was ordinarily a defensive piece of magic,” he said.

Harry shrugged. “It is. But it’s easy to learn how to send it to confuse your enemies instead. The heat and the light are more intense than with a normal fire. It reaches into people’s minds and panics them, and then they start using magic even when they know that they shouldn’t.”

Zacharias grinned at him. “You’re all right, Potter,” he said, as he lazily awakened one of his Housemates. “Going to make a good war leader.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, and chose the victim nearest Zacharias to practice the next *Ennervate* on. “What do you mean by that?” he whispered. He thought he was probably speaking low enough that no one else could hear him. “Why not use the one we already have?”

“Why should we worry about you training a war leader?” he asked. “I’m not the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Harry, and moved on to a boy who’d somehow managed to make boils grow on his own face, though the spell he used at the flame mirror should have resulted in them on his hands.

“I beg to differ,” Zacharias whispered. “If the Boy-Who-Lived is the champion we need to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, then you are.”

Harry stiffened his spine and refused to look at the annoying Hufflepuff again. “He doesn’t really know anything. He’s just making guesses.”

The fact that they were scarily accurate guesses, and ones that might be influential on the people around them, was not the point, Harry thought.

When he’d revived the last person, Harry returned to the front of the class. “That’s why showing off magic in an enclosed space is dangerous,” he remarked wryly. “Are you sure that you wouldn’t rather have a history lesson now?”

“I want to try that spell,” said Hermione, predictably, rising from the desk while clutching her wand. “Why would you say it *Speculum Ardoris*, though?” She pronounced the spell the way Harry had, though she made her stresses on the incantation obvious. “I think I’ve heard of this spell, but the emphases were in different places.”

“The difference in the stresses transforms it from a defensive to an offensive spell,” Harry explained. “Rather than just surrounding yourself with flame, you actively use it to confuse your enemies.”

Hermione frowned and settled a hand on her hip. “But I’ve never heard of that,” she said, managing to make it sound as though her never having heard of that variation of the spell was a crime against nature. “Where did you come up with that?”

Harry saw no need to tell her that he’d come up with it himself, by accident, during the summer before second year. “From a book that Hogwarts library probably doesn’t have,” he said amiably. “Our father is pureblood, remember? There are lots of books they like to retain for themselves.”

Hermione sighed and nodded.

“Do you want to try it?” Harry asked.

Hermione carefully aimed her wand and said the spell, with the stresses the same way Harry had performed them.

Flame welled weakly from her wand and whirled into a shield that wandered off as it would attack Zacharias. Harry
performed an *Accio* and summoned it back towards them, shaking his head. “You have to concentrate on your opponent, or your opponents, or it just goes towards whoever you happen to be thinking about,” he explained, keeping it to himself that it was interesting Hermione would be thinking about Zacharias. She normally seemed to ignore the Hufflepuff outside class.

Hermione nodded again, her face more serious this time, and managed to form a shield of flame around him on her second try. Harry knew the counter for it, of course; he erected a *Protego*, and the combination of two spells that reflected other attacks facing each other destabilized and destroyed the Flame Mirror. Hermione blinked at him as her wisps of red and gold flame spun into nothingness.

“How did you do that?” she asked.

Harry was more than happy to explain the theory behind it, especially since it now seemed as though other people besides Hermione and Zacharias were taking an interest in what was happening. Connor was practicing small movements with his wand, murmuring the spells under his breath. Ron tapped his wand nervously on the desk he sat at, though that stopped when he saw Harry watching him; he tried as best he could to pronounce the spell, though he didn’t produce more than a few bits of smoke. The seventh-year Hufflepuffs had already spread out in a dueling ring, which Harry wasn’t surprised to see that Cedric had organized.

Harry caught Luna’s eye. She was sitting and staring in wonder at the ceiling of the classroom, but she nodded and turned towards him when he came up to her.

“Is something the matter, Luna?” Harry asked softly. He hadn’t spent much time with her this year, but she hadn’t seemed quite this dreamy and distracted before. He glanced at the ceiling himself, but could see nothing to fascinate her there.

“Don’t you see the old shields?” Luna whispered.

“Old shields?” Harry squinted obediently upward again, but could still make nothing out.

“Yes,” said Luna. “Someone held this classroom against a siege once. The old furniture says so.” She touched the chair she sat on. “This one is talking to me about Helga Hufflepuff.”

Harry stared. The chair certainly didn’t look that old.

“Oh, no, it didn’t know her,” said Luna. “It heard the story from another, older desk, and that desk heard it from another one, and back, and so on.” She stroked the desk’s surface with affection. “But they don’t really mean to talk to me. They just have old magic on them, and I can sense it.”

Harry sat down in the desk beside her. Hermione was drilling Connor and Ron, Cedric was drilling Cho and the Hufflepuffs who had joined them, and Zacharias was walking around and poking holes in everyone else’s spell technique. No one needed him at the moment. “So what does the chair say about Helga Hufflepuff?”

Luna gestured around the room. “This used to be her private study. She would retreat here and meditate, or sometimes simply come up with new spells to hold and defend the earth. She loved gardening, you know, but it wasn’t something she was very good at by itself. She made up spells to defend the garden from weeds and beetles and pests.” Luna closed her eyes, as if meditating. “And she held the classroom against a siege by Slytherin once.”

Harry blinked. “I thought Slytherin and Gryffindor were enemies, not Slytherin and anyone else.”

“Oh, that was after he went mad,” said Luna seriously, opening her eyes and regarding him again. “I’m sure he didn’t mean it.”

Harry frowned, and thought of the history book on Slytherin that Narcissa Malfoy had given him for his first Christmas with the Malfoys. “I don’t recall that he was insane,” he said at last. “He just left the school when he got so disgusted with Gryffindor that he couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“That’s not what the chair says,” said Luna.

Harry studied the desk at what Luna sat with new determination. Could Luna really sense the vibrations of magic left behind, without even needing to cast a spell? That was a useful skill. And it would explain why she wandered around distracted most of the time. She was seeing a world that most wizards weren’t even aware existed, and it would take a lot to persuade her to pay attention to the real one.
“Can you do Speculum Ardoris?” he asked, to distract himself from asking more about her ability. He didn’t want Luna to feel harassed and pressured, or as if he cared only about what use her skill could be to him in battle and not about her as a person.

“No one but you could do it before this morning,” said Luna, “pronounced that way.”

Harry snorted. “I told Hermione I found it in a book—"

“And your wand says that you didn’t,” said Luna. “It’s been radiating that magic for a few years now. I think you invented it.”

Harry sighed. “In a way, but it’s not something I want many people to know about.”

Luna nodded at him. “I understand. Wrackspurts,” she said, as if that explained everything, and then drew her wand and set to practicing by herself.

Harry shook his head and stood, just as the door of the classroom opened. Harry turned, wondering if they were to have another visitor.

His mood changed dramatically when he realized it was Professor Moody stepping through the door. He bowed to the ex-Auror, thinking hard all the while. Why is he here now? Did he sense the magic, and come to make sure that we weren’t practicing any Dark Arts? Or is he going to do something odd, like the way he spoke to me the last time we had a private conversation?

“Though I felt magic up here,” grunted Moody, answering part of the question. “What are you doing?” He fixed his gaze on Harry, as if he assumed that Harry was the leader of this, whatever it was.

I’m a teacher, not a leader, Harry thought in irritation, but there would be little point in letting Moody see that irritation, so he didn’t. “I wanted to train my brother in some pureblood history, sir,” he said. “He invited along some friends, and then they wanted to see a spell instead. We’re practicing Speculum Ardoris.” He made sure to pronounce it the way it would be pronounced in the defensive spell, and thought he saw Moody’s shoulders loosen towards relaxation.

“Good, very good,” Moody said. “Extra practice, eh? A way of getting ready to defeat Dark Lords?”

“Well, Connor certainly needs it, sir,” said Harry, and then turned and motioned his brother forward. Connor had been successful with the Flame Mirror, or so he thought from watching him from the corner of his eye. “Do you want to show Professor Moody your magic, Connor?”

The expression on his brother’s face clearly said that it wasn’t his life’s dream, but he did take a deep breath, draw his wand, and then cast the Speculum Ardoris carefully in front of him.

Moody dissipated the Flame Mirror almost lazily, but his face was thoughtful. “Perhaps I should be teaching more magic that you could participate in during class,” he mused.

Harry refrained from nodding, though he saw many other heads around the room joining in, even the seventh-years. That’s odd, he thought. He had assumed Moody’s method of ranting at them about constant vigilance and showing them spells they couldn’t legally perform, like the Unforgivable Curses, was because they were fourth-years, too young to be trusted with the powerful magic. But perhaps even his upper classes received the same treatment.

“A little demonstration, then,” said Moody, slapping his wand against his palm. “Should you and I duel, Potter?”

Harry would have tried to pretend that Moody was talking about Connor, save that the professor’s eyes, both mortal and magical, were fixed on him. He took a little breath and drew his cypress wand.

“If you wish, sir,” he said softly.

It was amazing, or amusing, or both, how quickly the desks were pushed to the sides of the room, leaving Harry and Moody a clear space to move in. Luna gave Harry a final glance, said, “At least he’s not a Heliopath,” and joined the other students in leaning against the walls. She was the last to speak. The others were silent, intent on what was about to happen.
“Begin, then,” said Moody, and bowed to Harry.

Harry bowed back, though his mind was racing not with thoughts of the spells that he could put into the duel, but with reminders to himself. *Channel your magic through your wand only. No advanced spells. No Dark Arts. Defend if you can, but never let on that that’s all you’re doing.*

“*Diffindo!*” came Moody’s first spell, and Harry snapped up the Shield Charm, just barely remembering to blurt out the incantation that went with it. He caught Moody’s gaze, and realized that the Defense Professor didn’t intend to go easy on him.

“Full duel, Potter,” Moody whispered, and his second and third spell crackled at Harry. “*Finite Incantatem. Abicio!*”

Harry ducked the Flinging Hex as his Shield Charm dissipated, and decided that he would have to do something, or look as if he were merely scrambling around on the floor in front of his professor.

“*Haurio*,” he murmured, casting the jade-green shield on his left hand that would catch most curses flung at him, and then chose a spell that he knew had been more common twenty years ago, during Voldemort’s first rise. Moody ought to know it, at least, having worked as an Auror then. “*Obturbo!*”

Moody’s ears would be filled with an annoying buzzing sound about now, Harry knew. In a moment, the sounds would move into his inner ears, and then he would lose his balance. It would bring a quick end to the duel—

Or it should have, had not Moody narrowed his eyes and simply snapped, “*Finite Incantatem. Abicio!*” again.

The wave of the spell was too wide for the Absorption Charm to affect, and this time it caught Harry. He was grateful for the absence of desks as he went sailing ten feet, and landed in a roll. Lily had taught him how to fall, though, even if that had been from a broom, and he came back to his feet in a few moments.

“*Occaeco Manicula,*” Harry murmured, slipping now into the mindset of defending himself from an enemy. *No Dark Arts*, his brain reminded him, but he had bruises on the back of his head and arms now from the way he had landed, and he could no longer consider this just a demonstration for the other students, or a way of keeping his professor from learning all he could do. This was a situation that might end up with him getting seriously hurt, and then he would have to recover in the hospital wing and would be of no help to anyone.

Moody jumped as a small, invisible hand pinched him, and then Harry sent it to attack his hand, trying to get the wand out of his grip. He didn’t think a simple *Expelliarmus* would work on an experienced Auror, but the hand was harder to resist and infinitely more annoying.

That did not mean that Moody was inclined to give up, of course, and he showed it when he studied Harry for a moment, ostentatiously ignoring the hand’s efforts. Harry had just climbed to his feet when Moody pointed his wand and said, “*Sentire calamitatem noctis!*”

Harry grunted as a mental blow fell on and flowed over him. Abruptly, he could feel all the sleep he had lost recently—probably since school began, since that was how long Moody had known him, and this spell could only be used on the basis of the caster’s knowledge of the subject. He wanted nothing so much as to go to sleep, and spend the next several days and nights asleep, not helping Draco with the potion or worrying about Snape or advising the magical creatures or teaching lessons or shielding himself or…

Harry did a wandless, nonverbal *Finite Incantatem*, and picked his head up, meeting Moody’s eyes again. He knew that he did not imagine the emotions he saw there, though they surprised him. Moody looked as if he feared and respected Harry, both at once.

*I’m not doing that well against him*, Harry thought in bewilderment, and then had to dodge as Moody tried to use the Flinging Hex, *again*. Harry wondered if he was running low on inspiration, or just really liked that curse, for some reason.

Harry waited for a long moment, running as busily as he could around the ring of students, dodging the hexes and curses Moody threw, and then pinched him hard on the nerve in his right arm with the invisible hand, while shouting, “*Expelliarmus!*” at the same time.

Moody’s wand soared out of his hand, and Harry managed to grab it. He took a panting breath, and then bowed to Moody. He resisted the temptation to mumble something incoherent and go to sleep on the floor. The Sleep Debt Spell had hit him
hard. I should take better care of myself, he thought, as he tossed the wand back to its rightful owner, to make sure that I’m ready when and if Draco or Connor or someone else needs me.

“Yes, more active magic in the class will definitely be a bonus,” Moody muttered, his eyes never leaving Harry.

“I’m glad, sir,” said Harry, and then turned back to answer the questions that his makeshift class had, barely noticing as Moody slipped out. If that had been a test of some kind, it appeared that Harry had passed it.

The unintended consequence, of course—at least, Harry hadn’t intended them, and he was sure that Moody hadn’t, either—was that everyone else wanted to learn all the spells Harry and Moody had used during the duel, and not all of them could perform all of them, and people fussed, and Harry had to spend some time reviving people stupefied by finding out how much sleep they’d lost, all the while wishing for his bed.

I can’t see it, he reminded himself for the fiftieth time, as he brought Hermione back to the waking world. I have work to do.

******

“Ah, Harry. Come in, please.”

Harry entered the Headmaster’s office cautiously. It was true that Dumbledore had sent a politely-worded note to him during dinner, requesting his presence here, and it was true that Harry didn’t have any more pressing errand. Even Draco didn’t require him, wound up as he was in the final time-consuming but relatively simple steps for finishing the potion. So long as Dumbledore didn’t try to hurt him or break the bargains they had promised to abide by, why not come?

That every muscle in his body was aching and crying out for bed was not sufficient excuse, Harry thought.

“Do have a seat,” said Dumbledore, and Harry realized he’d been standing by his chair, lost in thought. He shook his head slightly and took the seat, refused the expected sweet, and looked at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore’s eyes were narrowed, his face shrewd. He stroked his beard as if he knew something Harry didn’t.

Quite possible, Harry thought. Everyone seemed to have secrets lately. Connor had been writing to James in private, and said that he didn’t want Harry involved in the arguments he was holding with his father. Hermione was starting to return Zacharias Smith’s crush with interest, and there were numerous other crushes that their owners, at least, took care to keep concealed blossoming in dusty corners of the school. McGonagall had returned to teaching with a new fire and passion that had been missing for the last two months, which made Harry think something must have been happened. Draco said that his potion would surprise everyone, even though Harry knew everything about it now, and Blaise Zabini had been hinting outrageously about the meeting Harry would have with Lucius Malfoy and the other Dark wizards in a few days’ time.

“I suppose,” said Dumbledore, “that you have not thought about needing my support, or you would have come to me before now.”

Harry blinked, torn out of his thoughts again. “What, Headmaster?”

“I am Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Harry,” said Dumbledore gently. “You’ll need my vote to depose Fudge and to free Severus when his trial comes before us in December. And yet, you have made no request for my support.”

Harry stiffened. Another complication that I didn’t need. “I simply assumed, sir,” he said. “that you would do what is right.”

“Ah.” Dumbledore shook his head. “But what is right? A question much debated by philosophers, and by wizards.”

Harry bared his teeth. “You must know that Fudge is the wrong Minister for us, Headmaster,” he said, “what with Voldemort coming back the way he is. We need someone strong in office, and Fudge is hysterical and prone to leaping at shadows. You should have replaced him yourself already. And Snape—he was arrested because of me, not because of himself. You could make everyone see that. I understand a little more about how Lords work in politics, now. Your magic guarantees you a lot of things.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Yes, it does, Harry, but I prefer to work within the bounds of law whenever possible, and leave people’s free choices up to themselves. I am, after all, a Light Lord. And the people of Great Britain have chosen Fudge to lead them as Minister of Magic, and more than once. I saw no reason to contest their decision, not when Cornelius did seem to be doing a good job.”
“And when he abducted me, and you found out what he’d been doing?” Harry demanded. “Why didn’t you do something then? He nearly drained my magic, Headmaster. You can’t have that. If I’m a Squib, then two possible interpretations of the prophecy—the one where I’m Connor’s protector and the one where I’m the soldier who has to defeat Voldemort—get messed up.”

“Not necessarily, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “There is still love, and I believe that love, and not magical power, is the key to defeating Voldemort.”

Harry ground his teeth, and didn’t dignify that with an answer. Dumbledore had done little to help him so far, and more to hinder. And it didn’t seem as though he were done hindering.

“What do you want?” Harry asked instead.

Dumbledore beamed. “Ah, yes, Harry, I thought you would never ask,” he said. “I am prepared to make one bargain with you, a very simple one. Fulfill it, and you are guaranteed that I will vote against Fudge’s remaining in office and for Severus’s freedom. That is all.”

Harry stared at him. “You would swear that by Merlin and your magic?”

“By one of the even more ancient oaths, if you would prefer that,” said Dumbledore. “But I do so swear. By Merlin and by my magic, I will vote against Fudge and for Severus if Harry Potter fulfills the bargain I ask of him.”

The magic settled around them, a tightening of bonds that Harry could feel like bared swords brushing his skin. Dumbledore’s magic was mighty. It would insure that he kept his promise.

Harry nodded slowly. “And what is this bargain?”

“Something, I think, that will increase your capacity for love and forgiveness, and therefore increase your capacity for defeating the Dark Lord,” said Dumbledore placidly. “A letter will come for you a few days after Halloween. It will be on parchment charmed to insure the absolute honesty of the person who writes the message. I will ask you to respond to it, and on the same kind of parchment; I have some that you may borrow. That is all. You must guarantee that you will receive and read the letter, and that you will then respond. I will ask for no promises of further communication, even if the letter-writer does reply to you. Just one.”

Harry swallowed. He suspected more under the surface—of course he did, this was Dumbledore—but he couldn’t deny how attractive the proposal sounded. Just one letter, and Dumbledore would vote the way Harry wanted.

Just one. How hard could it be? And if it’s honest, then I know that I’m not engaging in yet another fruitless political dance.

“I accept,” he whispered.

Dumbledore beamed at him. “Excellent, my boy! That is all I wanted to say. Did you have any questions to ask?”

He paused solicitously, but Harry shook his head. He hadn’t foreseen this danger, and now it was averted, with so small a sacrifice.

What other dangers do I need to watch out for? What other small sacrifices might I make to insure good results?

Harry went back to the Slytherin common room, though he wasn’t tired any more. Now he had to wonder what else he might have missed.

******

Albus closed his eyes as Harry left. A simple enough thing, but it meant so much, to him and to the one who would write the letter—and it would mean even more to Harry in the future, though at first it might be hard.

He does need to experience more love and forgiveness than he has right now. He is becoming nearly a mindless machine, thinking only of surviving from one duty to the next. He needs to learn to love and reconcile with the most important people in his life. Severus is important, of course, but secondary.
Albus could not give Harry the support he would need—the boy would never trust him if he tried, anyway—but he could bring in someone who would.

*Harry will thank me for this at the end of the year, I’m sure of it.*