Dear Harry:

I know you’re probably surprised to hear from me, and wondering what in the world I’m doing sending a letter to you now, when I haven’t written in months. Well, I’ll answer that question first, and then explain the other things you’ll need to know.

I’m coming to Hogwarts on Halloween to see you. I’m not coming alone, so don’t worry that I’ll get captured by Aurors the moment I step out of my hiding place. One of my hosts will be coming with me. She feels the need to see you, and she thinks that she and the others have managed to weaken my phoenix web enough that you can safely remove the final remnants of it.

As to where I’ve been…well, the problem with this is mostly the language that I need to use to explain matters to you. I can call my hosts Seers, because they are, but that doesn’t mean the same thing that it does when applied to a charlatan like Trelawney. They don’t See the future, and they don’t make prophecies, except educated guesses based on knowledge of human character and intelligence. They See the present, and the true state of human souls. I think the best term I’ve heard is clairvoyant, although even that has other meanings.

You see why this is confusing.

Most of the Seers find it hard to be around wizards or Muggles or magical creatures all the time; they can travel freely for a few months or years, and then they have to retreat, or their Sight would overwhelm them with all the information they’re receiving. So they created the Sanctuary, which is a retiring place for Seers, and sometimes other people who have deep problems influencing their minds and souls. They surrounded it with shadows of their own creation that owls have a hard time finding their way through, and which slow down those who try to approach, long enough for the Seers to judge if they’re safe. They’ve lifted the shadows briefly so that my owl can get to Hogwarts before Halloween. They don’t consider it fair that you should have no warning of what’s coming.

These Seers have a gift of absolute honesty, Harry, and thus absolute Light. One of them met me while I was spying among the Death Eaters, saw that I was not actually as dark of soul as I pretended to be, and realized why I was pretending in the first place. She offered me the peace of the Sanctuary if I was ever able to get away. That is the invitation I accepted when I left you last May, and the months here have done me more good than I can say. I am ready to come back into the world, see you again, and have the phoenix web taken off. The Seers can heal the soul, but not the more intricate portions of the mind.

As for why one of them wants to come and See you—well, they’ve felt the rumors of your magic even here, and we do get news, if a few weeks after everyone else in the wizarding world. They’ve heard of what’s happened with you and Dumbledore, with you and Snape, and with you and your father. They are concerned about what impact this has had on your soul. A powerful wizard with a broken soul is not good news for anyone. The Seer who will come with me, Vera, is the same one who Saw me among the Death Eaters all those years ago, and she is rested enough after months here to make the journey again with open eyes. She is personally curious about you, since she’s listened to the tales I’ve spun of you, and I assure you she will be sympathetic. She will not lie, however. That is anathema to any Seer.

Oh, yes, I almost forgot to mention this, in my haste to get the owl away—Remus is here as well. He has told me the story of his parting with James. He showed James the note that you sent with the antidote to the insanity potion in all innocence, thinking that James would be pleased to know his son had taken the step of healing him. James seized it and used it as evidence, and told the Aurors that Remus would testify against Snape, too. Remus argued with him, couldn’t persuade him to take that back, and left. We’re reconciled, in a way. Ours is a tentative sort of friendship, but even I can see that Remus needs to recover from the hold his wolf has on his soul, and I don’t have any Seers’ gifts. We talk and spend a little time together every day. There’s no point in rushing it. He needs more healing still, though, so he won’t come with me and Vera.

I know that you have other commitments on Halloween, more than likely. If Vera and I arrive when someone else is there, we are more than willing to wait. A newly recovered Seer tends to be proof against most people who might want to hurt her.

I’ll see you soon, Harry. And don’t even bother to write back telling me that it’s dangerous for me to come or that you don’t need anyone to look at you. No, it’s not, and yes, you do. We’re coming.
In hope,
Peter Pettigrew.

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Inviting Someone Dangerous to Tea

“And there. It’s done.”

Harry blinked as the potion gave a final slow roil and turned black. Draco was right. It was finished. He could see the compulsion that twined about Draco’s neck and shoulders shudder, once, as though someone had fed it more than it could bear. Then it cracked and fell away.

Draco blinked and touched his shoulder briefly, as though he had felt something brush it. Then he glanced at Harry. “I can hardly wait to use it,” he said. His face was dreamy. “Can you imagine, Harry? Everyone gave up hope on my being a magical heir to my family, except for my father, and that was only because he wanted to deny the truth. But now everyone will have no choice but to accept it.” He carefully slid the black liquid from the cauldron into a vial he had standing ready. Since Snape was gone, and Dumbledore remained in his own office, there was no one to see or care if Harry and Draco ducked in and out of Snape’s potions lab and borrowed his equipment. “I’ll be an heir after tomorrow.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, his joy at the cracking of the web fading. “Draco. Tomorrow is Halloween.”

Draco blinked at him. “It is?” he asked, and then snorted. “Of course, it is, Harry. I hadn’t forgotten.”

“But you promised your mother that you wouldn’t use the potion on Halloween,” Harry reminded him. He couldn’t believe Draco had forgotten, any more than he’d really forgotten the date, but he might have hoped Harry wasn’t remembering that.

Draco opened his mouth once, then turned away and concentrated on the black, stirring potion.

“Draco.”

Draco stared at him sullenly over his shoulder. “I want to use it, Harry,” he said. “You know that Halloween’s my best chance of summoning a ghost, any ghost, and this potion should break down any barriers that still exist.”

“You promised your mother that you wouldn’t.” Harry folded his arms and stared Draco down. “And now I want you to promise me.”

Draco gnawed at his lip.

“I don’t want to make you swear an oath,” said Harry. “Please, Draco. Just promise me. Just give me your word. It’s dangerous. I know that spell doesn’t talk about all the consequences of the potion.” *It certainly never mentioned that you would have a compulsion to brew the damn thing.* “Say that you won’t summon Julia Malfoy or drink the potion or offer her the potion.”

Draco attempted to look coy. Or maybe that was cunning, Harry thought. His friend’s face hadn’t worn his normal expressions in so long that it would take Harry time to learn them again. “What will you give me if I do promise?” he wheedled.

“Nothing,” said Harry. “This isn’t a bargain. This is for your own safety, Draco. I want you safe.”

Draco kicked the cauldron.

“Promise me, Draco,” said Harry.

Draco bowed his head, but Harry could hear his rebellious mutter. “What do you care? You’ll be in your formal meeting with my parents and other dangerous Dark wizards, anyway. And I can’t attend that meeting because I’m not a magical heir.” He spat the last words, then glared at Harry through a strand of hair. “Don’t you see why this is important to me? I thought you did, after I explained it.”
Harry rubbed his face with one hand. The Many snake on his arm hissed. “We could blind him. Then he would have no choice but not to use the potion.”

“You be quiet,” Harry told it, and faced Draco again. “I do understand,” he said, trying to make his voice soothing. “I do. But, as you pointed out, I’ll be busy in this formal meeting.” And that other one, too, with Peter and the Seer. Harry still didn’t plan to let the Seer actually look at him, but he would meet with Peter and take his phoenix web off. “I want to be with you when you use the potion. Please, Draco, promise me you’ll wait.”

Draco stared at nothing for long minutes. Harry waited, not knowing if he would have to make another argument or not.

Draco let out a windy sigh. “All right,” he said at last, most ungraciously. “I promise.”

Harry smiled and clasped his hand. He was startled when Draco used the hold to pull him into a hug, but not displeased. “Thank you,” he whispered. “I knew I could trust you.”

Draco’s arms tightened almost convulsively around him, as though he knew what Harry was not saying. I can trust almost no one else.

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Harry knew he was annoying his Housemates. His fingers tapped on his legs, his feet tapped under the table, and his wand all but tapped inside his sleeve.

He couldn’t help it. He was nervous. The Great Hall was fuller than he had ever seen it, crowded with the students of the other two wizarding schools, who had arrived that afternoon. Harry had got over his temptation to stare at them early on, though the silvery hair of the part-Veela students from Beauxbatons had drawn his attention, and the thick furs of the Durmstrang students. Madame Maxime, from Beauxbatons, was very obviously part-giant, and Karkaroff, the Headmaster of Durmstrang, made Harry’s scar bristle and itch when he walked past. So he might be a former Death Eater, Harry thought. They were all the kind of things that he would have to remember.

But, right now, he was more worried about other former Death Eaters who should be arriving at the school soon, by which method he didn’t know. It was Halloween night.

“Good evening, students.”

Harry concealed his groan. Dumbledore was rising to make a speech. From the sound of translation spells going into effect, at least he would only make it once, but that meant that the food would be later in coming, and perhaps Harry would miss the arrival of his allies. Lucius had said in his last letter that they would meet “after dinner,” but that was taking normal Hogwarts dining habits into account.

“I am most pleased to welcome our fellow wizarding schools to Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament,” said Dumbledore, his eyes shining in what Harry thought was a maniacal fashion. Of course, he was on edge. Harry took a deep breath and told himself to relax. Even Draco was staring calmly at the Headmaster, and no longer looked agitated at the thought that he might have to wait to use his potion. If he could be serene, then Harry could be. “It is a grand tradition that has been neglected for too many years. I realize that I have not explained much about the Tournament, so I shall do that, that all of our students, even those who are not participating in the Tasks, may understand what is at stake.”

Harry groaned under his breath and looked around for distraction. There was none. Everyone else looked interested in what Dumbledore was saying, and the lack of food on the plates wouldn’t let him occupy himself with eating.

Millicent poked him, and hissed at him to sit up straight and stop embarrassing Slytherin. Harry turned his gaze back reluctantly to the head of the Hall. He didn’t know what was wrong with him. Normally, it would have been no trouble to conceal his true feelings and let matters fall out however they would.

Perhaps it was lack of time to relax, he considered. He’d spend the last few days wondering what the meeting with Peter and the Seer would be like, and how he could convince Vera not to look at him. That was on top of helping Draco finish up his potion, and managing a few additional lessons, both privately with Connor and with many of the younger students attending, and trying to get Connor to tell him what he was arguing with James about (unsuccessfully; his twin had proven close-
mouthed on that point). The dreams about Voldemort, which had made his scar bleed every night this week, hadn’t helped, either.

He couldn’t collapse, though. It wasn’t allowed. He forced himself to listen to what Dumbledore was saying as if it were the most important thing in the world.

“…three champions, one from each school. The champions shall be chosen by means of the Goblet of Fire, which considers the names submitted to it and selects the most worthy. These students will have to be intelligent, creative, and flexible, as they will be participating in three dangerous Tasks.” Dumbledore smiled as a wave of gasps swept the tables. “Not impossible, I assure you, but they are dangerous.

“Each student is judged by a panel that includes both interested and impartial wizards. They will award a certain number of points for completing the Task, but also for how the student completes the Task, and the skill and character the completion demonstrates. The student with the largest number of points after the completion of all three Tasks wins the Tournament, a thousand Galleons, and honor and glory for his or her school.”

The murmurs were more excited now. Harry frowned at the students who were discussing the Tournament; it even sounded as if some of the Slytherins had fallen victim to that nonsense about honor and glory. I wonder what’s more attractive? The purse or the fame? The purse, I hope. Fame is not all that comfortable, and certainly nothing that someone should risk his life for.

“Our visiting students will join our students in classes for observations,” Dumbledore concluded serenely, “but have their own assignments and own lesson plans owled from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. We wish to give them the experience of a Hogwarts education, but not to demand that they drop their own lives completely, of course!” He smiled, and some of the students dutifully chuckled. Harry shot a longing glance at the doors of the Great Hall, and wondered if his allies were arriving now.

“And that is all I have to say.” Dumbledore clapped his hands, and the food finally, finally appeared on their plates. “May you have a pleasant feast!”

Harry heard the translation spells repeating Dumbledore’s words in French and a mixture of Eastern European languages. He wasted no time in starting to eat, though Millicent’s elbow in his ribs once again forced him to slow down. His mind sped up gradually, but this time it felt smoother, the way he had organized and arranged things when Snape and Draco had first changed on him. He had much to do, but he could manage it, if he thought like this.

“What is the matter with you?”

Harry jumped a bit when Millicent hissed in his ear, but then relaxed. After all, she was her father’s magical heir, and had told him, rather abruptly that afternoon, that she would be attending the meeting with him. “I just don’t want to miss the meeting,” he breathed back at her.

Millicent narrowed her eyes at him. Harry turned away from her gaze and concentrated on his dinner. The bread was rather dry, but he preferred it to letting Millicent see him too closely.

“You won’t,” she muttered at last. “They’ll wait for us, if we are held up, but I don’t think we will be.” She took a dainty bite of her own food, a French dish Harry didn’t recognize, before she went on. “And it isn’t just that. I haven’t been looking, but, Merlin, Harry, you look awful. What’s the matter?”

“What isn’t the matter?” Harry cut himself off before he could step into a tirade, though. He was not about to burden Millicent with his own problems. “No, I’m sorry. I just haven’t been sleeping well lately.” It not only happened to be true, it was a great all-purpose excuse.

Millicent chewed thoughtfully at her bread, as if to demonstrate how someone should eat it, and then shook her head. “It’s not just that. Or not only that. Come on, Harry, spill.”

Harry raised his eyebrows and returned to his dinner. “There’s nothing to spill, as you put it, Millicent.”

“Yes, there is.”
Harry ignored her for the rest of the meal, thought she managed to come up with taunts and indignant queries that he would
ordinarily have responded to. She was getting angry, he saw, when they stood up to leave. Good. That meant she would be
more likely to mistake his reactions for something other than what they were, and would be preoccupied with her own
emotions.

He did not want people to worry about him. If they worried, they would ask questions, and Harry had too many secrets to
hide. Besides, if they worried, they might offer comfort, and he might be too weak to prevent himself from taking it.

The meal done with, they filed out of the Great Hall. Most of the talk Harry could hear was about the Triwizard Tournament,
and he shook his head and snorted. Things like that mattered so little in the grand scheme. Why was everyone so concerned
about it?

Then he forced himself calm again. They’re concerned about it because it matters to them, Harry. And it doesn’t really
matter if it doesn’t matter to you, or you don’t think it important. They do. You can hardly dictate what other people value.

His breathing eased, and he turned his head and caught Millicent’s eye. Millicent nodded, and they slipped away from the
rest of the Slytherins, slowly enough that no one else noticed them go, except Draco, who murmured, “Have fun,” in a tone
that smacked of jealousy.

Harry sighed. Well, we’ll use his potion and see what happens soon enough—when taking proper precautions.

Millicent led the way to the Room of Requirement, looking over her shoulder with a frown now and again to make sure
Harry was following. Harry licked his lips as they came nearer and nearer the place. “How were they going to get in?” he
whispered to Millicent’s back.

Millicent shrugged. “Dad said that Starborn had found out some ways past the wards from the Dark Lord’s minions,
including one of them that got on the grounds last year.”

Fenrir Greyback, Harry’s mind supplied at once. He shivered, even as his concern grew. He hoped that Narcissa had dropped
her contact with the committed Death Eaters and her attempts to convince them that she might be interested in allying with
them. Remembering the wound on her arm, though, he doubted it.

They reached the Room of Requirement. A door was already visible. Millicent nodded at nothing in particular, then turned
and met Harry’s eyes. “Ready, Potter?”

Harry cocked his head. She almost never called him by his last name anymore. “Of course,” he said. “Unless you know
something I don’t, and this is really just an attempt to kidnap me and drain me of my magic.”

“Not all of us are the Minister.” Millicent’s voice was extremely dry. “No, I just meant whether you were ready to enter a
room full of suspicious Dark wizards experienced in detecting deception, especially since you seem so determined to prevent
anyone from asking questions about you.”

Shit. She wasn’t distracted, after all. Harry lifted his chin. Well, I know how to deal with this. I’ve danced harder patterns.
“No one will have to ask questions like that, because no one has to worry about my health,” he said calmly.

Millicent sneered at him and turned away. As she opened the door, which was made of some thick black wood that Harry
didn’t recognize, he took the chance to cast some wandless glamours on himself. He couldn’t hide everything, but he could
conceal the deepest shadows beneath his eyes and the agitation that might reveal itself in the small lines about his mouth.

Just a sacrifice I have to make if I want to dance with wizards like this.

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The Room of Requirement had shaped itself into a comfortable enough place, Hawthorn supposed. There were enough chairs
for all of them, including Potter and Millicent when they arrived. The seats themselves were plush, either deep green or
black, and circled around a hearth blazing with warm light. The walls themselves were white wood, whorled with so many
delicate designs that Hawthorn kept looking up and thinking she saw the Parkinson crest among them. Of course, the others
probably saw the crests or mottos of their own families.
She sat in one chair, acutely feeling the absence at her side. She would have thought Dragonsbane would come with her this night of all nights, wanting to meet with Potter, but he had only said that it would not be proper, and she hadn’t been prepared to argue with him. He saw the future, including the deaths of anyone who came near him. It was extremely hard to argue with him.

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy sat together on a divan beside her, sideways to the hearth, speaking together in soft voices. Hawthorn could not be sure if they were conducting an argument or not. She sniffed, and then smiled. Both of them smelled determined, which told her nothing, really.

Nearest the fire on the right side of the circle were Adalrico and Elfrida. Elfrida was five months gone in pregnancy now, but that did not mean she looked the worse for wear, as many witches did. She was puellaris, and she had given up much that she might have had for the sake of protecting her children. Her face was radiant, and whenever Adalrico said something that might relate to children, she would respond in a spirited snap. Hawthorn fully approved. The birth of pureblood children was rare enough. It was good that this one had a powerful mother protecting her.

On the left side of the circle, Arabella Zabini took a whole couch for herself, her hair tightly braided with silver pins that left no doubt about her Songstress status. Hawthorn met the other witch’s eyes and exchanged a small, guarded nod. Arabella had never been a Death Eater, and had never seemed to care about much beyond studying and raising her son and making herself beautiful—and singing, of course, but that was part of her magic and the result of her study. Hawthorn had no idea why she had really agreed to come to this meeting, nor what benefit there might be in it for her.

Close beside Arabella’s couch sat a hunched figure, covered in a dark cloak. Hawthorn did her best to ignore her. She smelled wrong. She was wrong. None of them could actually deny Acies Lestrange the right to come to a meeting like this, but it still made Hawthorn uncomfortable.

The door of the Room opened then, and Potter and Millicent stepped inside. Hawthorn found herself shifting forward before she realized what she was doing. She realized that she had missed Potter’s magic, which draped itself over the room in a purring carpet of song and strength. Hawthorn shook her head.

I could get addicted so easily.

It had been like this with the Dark Lord, too, at least when she had first met him, but he had changed sharply not long afterward. Harry did not smell as if he would change. Besides, the pull of his magic was entirely unselfconscious, without the edge of the compulsion to it that always rode Voldemort’s power. He moved through the world, wild and glorious, before he commanded anyone to do anything about that moving.

Hawthorn took a deep sniff, trying to pull in more of that magic.

She narrowed her eyes when she realized what she was smelling underneath the scent of power. Stress, fatigue, aching weariness, the way that she smelled herself when she’d been up for all three full moon nights. The boy looked fine, particularly given that the only light in the Room was the low radiance of the fire, but he smelled as if he should have been on edge, ready to snap or collapse.

Hawthorn leaned back on the couch and slowly brought her fingers together. I would not like him to collapse. He is our ally, and a powerful wizard besides.

Perhaps there is something I can do.

******

Harry relaxed when he saw the people in the room. They were all ones he had met at least once, though Arabella Zabini’s sharp, inquisitive eyes were almost a stranger’s to him.

No. Wait.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the cloaked figure on the furthest chair. “Who is she?” he asked, not realizing until the words were out of his mouth that his magic had already identified the cloaked figure as female.

The witch shifted, and then stood. Her voice was so low and rough that Harry could easily have mistaken her sex. “My name is Acies Lestrange.” Harry snarled and twitched his wand into his hand, but the witch shook her head calmly. “No. You need not prepare to defend yourself. Rodolphus and Rabastan are distant cousins to me. I am not an heir of the true line, only of a
small one. I was never a Death Eater. But I did want to meet you.”

Harry let out a small breath. “All right,” he said. “Why?”

“Will you permit me to look at you?” Acies lifted a hand to the hood of her cloak. “Meeting my gaze is rather uncomfortable, but it will explain more than words ever could. Indeed,” she added, with a hint of humor to her words for the first time, “without this gaze, I don’t think that you would believe my story. And since you are vates, I feel some kinship to you already.”

Harry blinked. Almost no one knew he was vates. “Who are you?”

“This,” said Acies, and dropped her hood.

Harry met her eyes, but they weren’t a human pair of eyes. They blazed at him, and heat swept over his body as though the fire had come out of the hearth. Harry felt wind follow after the fire, and then a steady roaring invaded his ears. His braced legs kept him from collapsing to the floor, but it was a near thing. He ground his teeth as singing similar to the music he had heard at Grimmauld Place arose, though he was sure Acies had not opened her mouth since those initial words.

Then the sensations stopped. Harry looked up to see that Acies had put on her hood again.

“What was that?” Harry whispered. His own voice shook. He attempted to push the shock away and master himself, but it was harder than he had expected. Only the full moon night he had run through the Forest and the dark gate he had gone through on Walpurgis Night rivaled what he had just experienced in wildness.

“You will believe me now, I think,” said Acies. “One of my ancestors grew obsessed with breeding magical creature blood and abilities into our line. However, there are relatively few magical creatures whom wizards can breed with any ease. When he had secured those abilities for his children, he went after the ones we could not physically breed with.” Acies chuckled, and Harry was not surprised to smell smoke rising when she did. “He could not, despite the experiments he tried, actually mate any of his relatives to those creatures, but he could and did link their minds, in effect exchanging their thoughts. All but one of his daughters died of the shock. She lived, and she had children, and some of us have had thoughts like that creature’s forever after. A small part of us is them.”

“And what was the creature?” Harry asked.

“A dragon, Mr. Potter,” said Acies, calmly. “Wildest of all magical creatures. I have sensed what you are moving towards, and I have seen you from a distance. I wanted to see you close, that I might know if you really are the vates that we have been waiting for, or merely another lie. You have met my gaze, and proven that you are what your magic’s beacon claimed. Thank you.” She stepped back and sat down in her chair again. “I consider myself your ally now. The monies of my part of the Lestrange family, and any help that I might personally give, are at your disposal.”

Harry blinked, and blinked again. The contact with her gaze had unexpectedly refreshed him, made him feel freer than he had in some time, and he had won another ally, it seemed, for a very small price. “Thank you,” he said, unsteadily, and then turned and faced Arabella Zabini, who reclined beside Acies. “My lady Songstress. Why have you come?”

Arabella smiled gently at him. “I wanted you to know, Mr. Potter,” she said, in that deep, thrilling voice, “that I have books you might be interested in, books written in Parseltongue.”

Harry blinked. “How did you acquire them?” He wondered if all of them had planned this together, to further unsettle him, but he did not think so.

“Now, Mr. Potter.” Arabella inclined her head and peered up at him between her lashes. “A lady never reveals all her secrets. Suffice it to say that I have them. I will be willing to give you one of them in return for a promise from you. A simple promise, of course, and one that I think you would probably give anyway, but one I want to be sure of. I have no intention of tying myself to someone who will act against my interests.”

Harry frowned at her. “You weren’t a Death Eater.”

“But I am a Dark witch,” said Arabella softly. “Both declared to the Dark and someone who uses Dark magic, Mr. Potter. Studying song the way I have is not something the Ministry approves of, because my songs can be used to persuade others of
many things, truth only one of them. I want your promise that you will never declare yourself a Light Lord. We have had enough trouble with Dumbledore on that front. As long as I know that you won’t become another threat like that, then I am hardly going to require that you declare any other formal allegiance. Only what you won’t. It is true that you do not aspire to be like him?” Her eyes shone like Blaise’s when she was in a passion, Harry realized. Otherwise, she looked largely different, both more alive and darker of skin than Blaise was.

“I do not aspire to be like him,” said Harry. This, he could say in a steady voice. “It would be death to my ambitions as vates. No, by Merlin and my magic, I never aspire to become a Light Lord.”

Arabella smiled as though someone had just offered to kiss her hand. “Very good, Mr. Potter,” she said. “I shall send the book in a few days. That is all I wanted to ask of you.”

Harry nodded, and then turned towards Adalrico and Elfrida. Millicent, who had seated herself beside her parents, started to say something, but her mother was already speaking, eyes shining with a strength that Harry had not thought she possessed.

“Mr. Potter,” said Elfrida, her hands cradled around her belly, “I have come to ask you to extend your formal alliance with my family to the babe I carry.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Mrs. Bulstrode,” he said, “I would have done that without your asking, just as I assume you would have considered yourself allies of any younger sibling or cousin I might have. Why do you feel the need to ask for more of it?”

Elfrida smiled at him. Harry caught his breath as he saw how it transformed her face, shading it with a glow of white-gold magic. *Merlin, I wonder what exactly she looks like when she’s defending her children.* “Because,” she said with supreme confidence, “the world will change when you rise to power. I know it. I would have my second daughter know that magic from the moment of her birth. I would like to ask you to attend her birth and spare what attention you can to her over the years, so that she never grows up with the cringing mixture of fear and awe that too many other wizards have around strong magic.” She did not look at Adalrico, but Harry saw him flinch anyway. “Millicent is as old as you are, so she had no chance to know you as Marian will. She will live in the future you craft. Will you do this? I know Marian is only one among many wizarding children whom you will affect, but she is one of only a few who might grow up without that fear that has ruined so many things about our world.”

Harry could feel his eyes soften. Elfrida was right. Fear had controlled too much of the way everyone related to powerful wizards, from the way that Death Eaters followed Voldemort to the way that his mother and Dumbledore had tried to control him. “Of course I will do it,” he said quietly. “I am honored. Mrs. Bulstrode, and I wish that all mothers were as dedicated to their children as you are.”

Elfrida gave him a smile of breathtaking sweetness, and sat down again. Adalrico just coughed in embarrassment when Harry looked at him. “I was here just in case you refused,” he muttered. “But you didn’t.”

Harry snorted back at him, and turned to face the Malfoys. Narcissa gave him a faint smile. “Ah. Harry should have known that Narcissa was probably the hardest challenge he would face in this room. She had been concerned about him the other weekend, after all. “Very well, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said.

Millicent coughed.

Narcissa leaned forward, her eyes narrowed. “Is that true?” she asked. “Harry, I know that you have an unusually low amount of concern for yourself, but you should not. I know you are reluctant to speak on personal grounds, so I will talk about our alliance instead. If you run yourself to death trying to be vates and protector for everyone, then you cannot help us. Remember that.”

Harry relaxed. He knew how to deal with this, too. “Of course I remember that, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said. “I would never do such a thing.”

“Liar.”

Harry jumped. The word did not come from Millicent, or even from Narcissa, who was watching him with utmost concern. It
came from the chair where Hawthorn Parkinson rested. Harry looked at her, and found her eyes narrowed, her nose flexing as she sniffed.

_Bloody glamours_, Harry thought, as he frowned at her. _Should have known they wouldn’t fool a werewolf’s nose. Why don’t any of the books teach glamours to fool scent the way they do sight and sound?

“You smell nearly sick with stress and fatigue,” Hawthorn said softly. “I assume that you have concealed the evidence, but I know that it is there. I would be surprised if it were not. My daughter has owled me about what you have been doing to try and save your guardian, and the private lessons you have been holding, and many other things that would tax your time and patience.”

_Bloody Pansy!_ Harry kept his expression calm with an effort. “Other people have already spoken to me about this, Mrs. Parkinson,” he said. “I promise, I am sleeping more, and one of my burdens has just been lifted from my shoulders.” _Draco finished the potion, and his compulsion has lifted. Of course I’m happier. “I am alive to all that my duties demand of me. I will not fail you. I will swear that by any oath you like.”

“We’re more afraid that you’ll keep your promises to us but destroy yourself in the process, Harry,” said Narcissa softly, pulling his attention back to her. “I think it’s time for an arrangement like the one I know the Parkinsons and Bulstrodes employed last year. I will ask Draco to watch over you more closely.” She glanced at Hawthorn. “I am sure that Hawthorn could ask Pansy to do the same thing.”

“We’d be glad to do it,” said Millicent unexpectedly. “We already do, and owl our parents about you, Harry—“

_Bloody Millicent_. Harry gave her a glare that she ignored with supreme ease.

“But I think it’s time to actively interfere.” Millicent smiled serenely at him. “It won’t be too much trouble to make sure that you go to sleep on time and don’t wear yourself out, will it, Harry? After all, you yourself said that you’ve been trying to improve matters.”

“I don’t need _minders_,” said Harry, unable to keep silent any longer. He turned towards Lucius, who had sat silent through all this, watching him with a cool, assessing gaze. “Sir, you and I have been doing a truce-dance for nearly two years now,” he said quietly. “It will be complete come Yule. You would not have entered the dance with me if you did not think of me as an equal, would you? Not a child, not someone who needs minders.”

Lucius shook his head slowly, barely stirring his long hair. Harry relaxed. He had put Lucius on the spot, forcing him to claim equal status for Harry unless he wanted to impugn his own honor, but it had worked. Surely the others would have to see that someone whom _Lucius_ respected would keep his promises and was not in need of people to trail around after him.

“I trust you to complete the truce-dance, Mr. Potter,” said Lucius. “I came here merely to see if you intended to change your mind about giving me whatever gift I ask for come Yule.”

Harry relaxed further. _Lucius is predictable_. Not safe, but Harry knew every step of this dance, and he could take part in it without feeling as though someone would suddenly turn on him. “No, sir,” he said. “I promised that, in gratitude for all you’ve done for me—” he meant the permission to free Dobby “—and I do intend to keep that promise.”

Lucius nodded. Then he smiled. Harry took a step backward. _Lucius isn’t supposed to smile like that._

“That said,” Lucius murmured, “it would do me no good at all if you collapsed, as you did the Christmas we began the truce-dance, and spent the day in the hospital wing. I do not fancy receiving my gift from an ally who cannot stand. It would make _me_ look weak. I suggest that you let your friends watch over you, Mr. Potter. There is no shame in such a thing. All the greatest wizards have had such close guards around them.” His eyes flashed for a moment, and his right hand twitched, as if he would touch the Dark Mark hidden on his left arm. “Their relationship to them has been defined by their own souls. The Dark Lord did—what he did. Dumbledore treats no one as an equal, but manipulates them all. Given that you have resolved never to be a Light Lord, and to help others around you, I should think an arrangement of mutual aid would be agreeable to everyone involved.”

Harry stiffened. His mind raced in circles again, for just a moment.

_I’m not going to be able to get out of this._
Then he forced his breathing smooth, and told himself it could have been worse. So more people were looking at him, instead of no one. It did not mean he had to let them see the truth. No one would find out what Lily and James had done. He would make sure of that. No one had to accompany him to all his meetings with the magical creatures in the Forest, either; Harry could point out that they wouldn’t trust another wizard or witch, and force his minders to stay behind. He was already watched in the lessons. He could use magic to keep business like this letter he had to write a few days after Halloween private.

The hardest thing to hide is going to be the nightmares, he thought, particularly if they’ve got Blaise and Draco watching me. But I need practice on glamours and illusions, anyway.

He met Lucius’s eyes and nodded. “If you concur, sir, then I’ll trust your judgment.”

He saw the surprise on Hawthorn’s face, and Narcissa’s, before they hid it. Harry managed to dredge up a smile for them.

They aren’t going to see anything I don’t want them to see. I’m more worried about convincing this Vera that she doesn’t really need to look at me.

“Did anyone need anything else?” he asked, wondering if the meeting could conclude now and he could go meet with Peter and the Seer.

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Hawthorn leaned back in her seat and listened to her allies deny that they needed anything else. She, too, shook her head when Harry looked inquiringly at her. She had come along simply to see what the others wanted and to renew her ties with Harry, if they needed renewing.

You’re thinking of him as Harry now, you realize.

She did realize that, but there was little to be done about it, she thought. She was growing closer to the child than she would have believed possible, given that he was so powerful. Being a Death Eater had never been like this, could never be like this.

And he seemed determined to destroy himself before letting anyone else suffer. Protect and defend and serve, the words Narcissa had written to him, and he seemed to have taken them to heart more completely than anyone Hawthorn had ever known of, or even read of in history.

Even with the victory they had won, Hawthorn thought they had lost something. She could smell Harry’s determination, and knew that he probably intended to hide himself even better than he had been.

I might be able to do something about that, she thought. He cannot be as good at facing a “threat” of help he does not know is coming.

After all, if he is so dedicated to us, the least we can do is be dedicated to him in return, and catch him when he falls, the way he would catch us.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Seven: What Light is Like

Harry stepped out of the Room of Requirement, and realized abruptly that Peter hadn’t said where he and Vera would meet him. Well, it will have to be somewhere outside the school, at least, since I think Dumbledore still has those wards up to prevent Peter from entering.

He took the wand out from his pocket and murmured, “Point Me Peter Pettigrew.”

The wand spun once, then pointed steadily towards the school’s front doors. Harry nodded and took a step to follow it.

Millicent’s hand grasped his shoulder, pulling him to a halt. “Where do you think you’re going, Harry?” she asked, with false cheeriness. “You said that you’d been trying to sleep better lately. I think you would sleep better if you returned to our
Harry gritted his teeth and jerked hard, a twisting motion that his mother had taught him for when an enemy had hold of him. It worked now, and Millicent’s hand fell away. “I have another meeting,” he hissed at her. Her eyes had gone wide as she watched him, the first time Harry had seen them do so. “I don’t need you to accompany me everywhere, and I certainly don’t need you interfering with those things that I’ve promised other people I’d do.”

Millicent merely watched him go. Harry wondered if she planned an interrogation for when he returned to Slytherin, or had just decided there was nothing she could do for right now. It was too much to hope that she would really never try to delay him or interfere again.

Harry ducked past patrolling prefects and Professors, shading himself with a Disillusionment Charm when he needed to. The great doors of Hogwarts were still open, and he stepped outside. He did force himself to pause and draw the sweet air of the outdoors into his lungs.

Well, perhaps not that sweet, after all, he thought with a grimace, as the rich horsey smell of the giant beasts that pulled the Beauxbatons carriage came to him.

Harry turned and swept the lawn in front of him with his eyes, where the wand pointed, but could see nothing. Of course, Peter was probably a rat, and he wouldn’t be able to see Harry under the Charm anyway. Harry shook his head and dropped the Charm, then called, “Peter?” as loudly as he dared.

Movement shimmered off to the left, and Harry saw the flash of a gray rat running close to the ground—a motion he’d learned to identify easily after last year. The rat sat up briefly as if to groom its whiskers, and motioned to him with one paw. Harry smiled and followed.

Peter led him along the wall of the castle towards Gryffindor Tower and out of immediate sight of the front doors before he changed back. Then he spent a moment shuffling and adjusting his limbs before he faced Harry and held out his hand.

“Peter,” said Harry, as he clasped the hand. “You look well.”

And he did. His face was no longer as thin and as haunted as it had been last year, and his blue eyes were bright with good humor. Just a short time of living away from the Dementors and the Aurors hunting him had made a difference, Harry thought. Even his smile was slower, deeper, warmer.

“Harry,” said Peter. “Yes, I am feeling better—even better now that I can see you. The Sanctuary’s a remarkable place. Rest there is true rest, without the ashy feeling of too many snatched hours of sleep that I’d been having before I went. The Seers know exactly what kind of light you need, the number of cushions that are comfortable on your bed, when you’re suffering from bouts of fear or dreamlessness, and one of them is usually awake to talk to. The Sanctuary has no normal night and day, surrounded by its shadows as it is.” Peter gave a dreamy smile. “I never thought I could like an enclosed space after Azkaban, but I was wrong.”

Harry could feel himself relaxing, both at the obvious joy and peace in Peter’s voice, and the fact that there was no Seer around yet. “Where is Vera?” he asked, to make sure.

“She’ll be along in a while,” said Peter, and then smiled at him. “I’m almost completely healed. But the phoenix web is still there. Since it’s a web, and you’re well on your way to becoming *vates*, they thought you could break it.”

Harry blinked, wondering how Peter had known about his progress towards becoming *vates*, and then remembered that Peter had said Remus had come to the Sanctuary. *Of course. He’d be able to tell him about my breaking the web of his Obliviate. “I’ll try,” said Harry. “But if I’m hurting you, then you’ll have to tell me. I still haven’t broken many webs.”*

Peter chuckled. “I made my pain known last year whenever it happened, Harry,” he said, sitting down. “I’ve only learned to be more honest in the Sanctuary. Come, I give you permission to use Legilimency on me.”

Harry nodded and took Peter’s head between his hands. Peter gazed back at him trustingly. That gave Harry much more confidence than he otherwise would have to lean near and murmur, “*Legilimens.*”

The familiar sensation of wind sweeping him forward caught him up, and then he hovered in a place entirely unfamiliar to
him. Peter’s mind last year had looked like Azkaban, down to dirty gray walls and long corridors filled with locked cells.

This place was white, and opulent in a way that made it seem like a true home, with arched doorways and doors that stood half-open as if inviting a visitor inside. Harry could see sparkling treasures beyond the doors that he supposed made up Peter’s most recent memories. Others lay further back, in shadow, but that didn’t seem to matter as much; Peter would probably share them if Harry just coaxed him a bit. The light came from no visible source, but sparkled on off-white pillows and cream-colored divans and many other pale shades that varied enough to never become monotonous. Harry wondered if Peter had modeled his mind after the Sanctuary, or if it was just the natural influence of the place creeping in. Either way, his words about how peaceful it was there rang even truer now.

The one thing out of place in all that white was the phoenix web, a harsh, ugly golden spider crouched on one of the divans. Harry frowned at it and strode towards it, one hand extended.

“You need to leave,” he told it.

He received a clacking, hissing refusal in return, and the web curled up, demonstrating its mastery of the one part of Peter’s mind it could still hold. Harry shook his head and crouched over the web, studying it. It had a single tiny figure stuck in it. After a moment, he recognized it as a replica of himself.

Harry blinked, then nodded. Of course it would be. Peter broke free of Azkaban by focusing the web around a duty to protect and save me instead of a duty to protect and save his friends. It only makes sense that I’m an anchor for one corner of the damn thing.

Harry lowered his hand and put it on the web. The web hissed at him, and made as if to coil about his arm.

He summoned what he thought of as his 

$\textit{vates}$

mindset in retaliation. The web’s strands touching him withered and died. The golden thing trembled and gave a little warbling song of distress that might have changed Harry’s mind if he hadn’t heard the net in his head sing the same way.

“No,” he said. “You should never have been here at all. You certainly shouldn’t have lasted so long. You are going.”

He moved a step backward and wound his other hand into place. The web shone with desperate strength, shooting out a new tendril to curl around the back of the divan. Harry yanked to the side, and that tendril was forced to retract before it found an anchor. Harry closed his eyes.

He concentrated on the sound of $\textit{true}$ phoenix song, as he remembered it soothing him to sleep this summer, before the abduction and the Death Eaters and Snape’s arrest and the other parts of this mess. The song swelled in his imagination, clear and pure, and overrode the whining dissonance the web was trying to use to protect itself.

In moments, the real song conquered the pretense, and then the web withered in his fingers. Harry opened his eyes to see that he held nothing more than a handful of golden dust, and the replica of himself had taken its place among the other memories somewhere in one of the white rooms, no more or less important than the rest—certainly no longer the purpose that Peter lived for.

Harry smiled, blew the dust carefully into the shadows so that it had no chance of forming as a web again, and stepped backward, sliding out of Peter’s wonderfully warm and well-lit mind with a murmured word.

He opened his eyes, blinked a bit, and then met Peter’s wondering gaze. Peter was feeling the side of his head as though someone had hit him with a hammer and then the lump had sunk again to become part of his skin.

“That feels—wonderful,” he murmured. “Like freedom.” He met Harry’s eyes, and Harry was torn between pride and embarrassment at seeing awe in his face. “I never imagined it would be so easy.”

Harry shrugged and turned slightly so that he wouldn’t need to meet Peter’s eyes. “It wouldn’t have been, last year,” he said. “I tore Remus’s own web on his memories too swiftly, and let all the emotions flow back in. And the Seers must have weakened your web quite a bit. This one wasn’t hard.”

“Thank you for my freedom, Harry,” said Peter. “And now, to the reason that I came.” He sat down on the grass.
Harry turned to face him. “Don’t you think we should get under shelter?” he asked.

Peter shook his head. “I don’t believe that anyone else has reason to come here, and if they do, then you and I can both hide well enough.” He laid emphasis on the word “hide” that Harry didn’t understand, staring at him all the while.

Harry nodded slowly, perplexed. “And what do you mean, the reason you came?” he added, his ears finally delivering what they’d heard to his brain. “I thought you came to have the phoenix web removed.”

“And to see you.” Peter leaned forward, one hand washing over the other. “Harry, you can’t just have absorbed all the blows you took in the last few months and gone on.”

Harry blinked, mildly insulted that Peter would think that. “Of course I can,” he said. “I was trained to be strong and resilient, and I’ve added more strength to that lately. I’m glad that you were concerned.” That much was true. Knowing someone else still cared about him when his father, Snape, and Draco had turned odd mattered more than Harry wanted to admit. “But really, there’s nothing to be worried about. I’m doing better, I promise. I have some hope that the Minister will be voted out of office and Snape will come home after his trial.”

Peter just shook his head.

“What?” Harry had to swallow the shout he wanted to make. “What?” he repeated more insistently. “Did one of the Seers prophesize that Snape is never coming home?”

“They aren’t that kind of Seer, Harry, remember?” Peter smiled at him, but there was something incredibly weary behind the expression. “They See the present, not the future. And no, my headshake has nothing to do with Snape, though he deserves a bite on the ankle if anyone does. I’m worried about you. What would you think of someone whom all of your experiences in these past few months had happened to? Would you really think that he was all right or doing better?”

Harry lifted his head. Here it comes again, he thought in irritation. At least I don’t think he did bring the Seer the way he said he did. “Of course not,” he said. “But those are most people. I’m me.”

“Better than most people, then?” Peter’s voice was extremely dry.

“Of course not.”

“Stronger than they are?”

Harry shook his head, trying to convey what he really felt. The truest words were also the ones that other people tended to dismiss, because they didn’t understand them like he did. “It’s just—I don’t know them from the inside out like I do myself,” he said, in sudden inspiration. “I wouldn’t know for sure what they really felt. And if someone said that she wasn’t afraid any more and then demonstrated signs of fear, I would suspect her of lying. But I know what I feel, and I feel fine. And I know that I can keep going.” He smiled at Peter. “I know that you said you trusted me last year, enough to reveal secrets to me that you’d carried for twelve years. Can’t you trust me now? Can’t you see that I’m fine?”

“You are most assuredly not fine, Harry,” said a light voice from behind him. “You have not been since you were a year and a half old.”

Harry shot to his feet, moving instinctively in front of Peter. Then he realized that Peter hadn’t moved, hadn’t started, hadn’t seemed upset at all. He gave him a betrayed glance.

Peter stared back at him without remorse. “Vera wanted a chance to observe you from afar for a while, Harry,” he said. “Seers need only one glance to gather the truth of a human soul, but they need time to absorb it, to understand what they’re Seeing. She agreed to remain back while you took the web off me.”

“You lied to me,” Harry snarled, his eyes tracking the progress of the short, plump witch walking towards them along the castle wall. She wasn’t close enough for him to see her face yet, but he was sure it would wear an expression of concern—concern she would be better off spending elsewhere, concern that would reveal his deepest secrets if he let it, concern that would encourage him to weakness if he spent too much time around it. He backed away from Vera. “I trusted you, and you lied to me.”
Peter simply looked at him. “I didn’t lie, Harry,” he said quietly. “I warned you we were both coming. I said that she would be along in a while. I told you that Seers have a gift of absolute honesty, and absolute Light. I don’t know why you thought you could hide from that, and frankly, I don’t understand why you wish to. If you’re going to be vates, then you should want to understand yourself. You won’t have another opportunity to understand yourself like this.”

Harry ground his teeth. *Merlin, I hate this.* He always hated the moments when two opposite obligations tugged at him.

If he did want to be vates, then yes, he should try to understand himself, and he had even said he would try in the Owler on the vernal equinox, when his own phoenix web broke. And his doing what he could to free the magical creatures was important to so many people, even wizards. It was certainly not a set of principles or a duty that he wanted to abandon.

But he needed to keep others’ secrets, too—most especially his parents’. If this Seer really had Seen everything, she would know about what Lily and James had done now. Harry didn’t want that. He wondered, dismally, what the chances were that Seers were absolutely trusted witnesses in court, and wouldn’t even be required to take Veritaserum to validate their testimony.

He turned to Vera as she came up to him, and inclined his head, not meeting her eyes. He wouldn’t run away, but he didn’t need to show politeness to her, either. “How do you do, ma’am?” he asked, deliberately keeping it to a mumble.

“Much better than you do,” said Vera, and the sharp, crisp tones of her voice made Harry lift his head to look at her. Vera was a woman he could have passed in the streets of Hogsmeade without noticing. Her face was calm and ordinary, marked with wrinkles from laughter and frowning and squinting at parchments. Her eyes were deep brown, but not nearly as dark as Snape’s. Her hair was brown and tied in a neat bun on the back of her head. There was no sign that she was someone who could just rip the secrets of another wizard’s soul away from him.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Harry, determined to bluff it out to the end. *Perhaps, if I can show her just how much I don’t want this, then she’ll give up and respect my privacy.* “I’ve achieved several last things in the last little while that I’m very proud of. One of my friends has finally stopped being stupid. I’ve met with my allies and sent them home happy. I think I’m going to get my guardian back from the Ministry unharmed.”

Vera heard him out, her hands folded. She was a solid presence. Harry was sure now that he could have passed her without noticing anything unusual about her, but at least she would have drawn his eye. She did not look as though any blow could rock her, or anything she had seen could ultimately shock her. Harry supposed that was a good characteristic for someone who went around peering into people’s skulls and being a busybody about what she found there.

“You’ve achieved them all at costs to yourself,” Vera said, when she seemed sure that he’d finished. “You’ve given up time and effort, which anyone might have done, but you’ve also agreed to answer a letter from someone whom you don’t want to hear from again, and you’ve spent an awful lot of time lying to other people, haven’t you? You don’t want anyone to worry about you. Why is that? Why wouldn’t someone who wore himself out in the service of others at least want that service understood and appreciated for what it is?”

“Shut up,” said Harry, and then clamped his lips together. He hadn’t meant to be that impolite, really he hadn’t, but this—this was too much. He backed a step away from her, and felt Peter’s hand close on his arm, light but undeniable.

“Harry,” Peter murmured, “just listen to her. She was the one who convinced me that I wasn’t evil for following the orders I was given out of love and a need to protect my friends. I remembered those words the whole time I was in Azkaban, and they were one of the things that gave me the courage to break out.”

“I don’t want her looking at me,” said Harry.

“It’s too late, Harry.” Vera’s voice was gentle. “I already have. And you don’t want anyone looking at you, isn’t that so? That conditioning of your mother’s still lingers very strongly. You bounce attention from yourself to other people whom you think have worse problems. You want everyone to look at Connor and not at you, even when you do something truly remarkable. You don’t want anyone to see the immense load of secrets you’re carrying, even when they almost break you.”

Harry heard his own breath rushing out of his lungs in a frantic, awkward mess. He controlled the temptation to step back or bolt or do something else unfortunate. He had to brazen this out, especially if Vera already had all his secrets. He had to at least persuade her not to spread them any further.
“It wasn’t her fault,” he told Vera. “It was—it wasn’t the best thing she could have done, but it was necessary, she thought, to protect Connor. I had to be hidden so that no one would notice me when they were making plans to take my brother down.”

“And now?” Vera asked. “Now that you have accepted that your brother might not be the only one who needs protection, why do you insist on staying hidden? Your magic is very powerful, Harry. You could accomplish much if you acknowledged that and accepted the position of leader that others want to give you.”

Harry bared his teeth. I can explain this, but they won’t understand. “People are so wonderful,” he told Vera. “And this already sounds stupid.”

Vera simply raised her eyebrows. “I’ve already seen your justifications, Harry,” she said. “Explain. I can promise, I won’t tell you that it sounds stupid. Many other things in your soul have far less sense backing them, such as what your parents did to you.” Her face darkened for the first time, and she narrowed her eyes. “I would like to look into their souls, if they were here, and see what this looks like to them. I am sure I would find some of the most cramped and twisted reasoning ever woven.”

“Do you want to hear what I’m saying, or do you want to insult my parents?” Harry demanded.

“The first, of course,” said Vera. “This is the first time you’ve ever really said this aloud, Harry. It’s an event, I think.”

Harry scowled at her. I know what I’m saying, and I’m the only one it should matter to. Why does it matter if others hear it or not? “People are so wonderful,” he said steadily, and ignored the whining pulse in his head that reminded him how idiotic words like this sounded when he expressed them. “They have—they have their own souls, their own inner existences. It matters that they exist in the world. They’re all beautiful, looked at in the right way. Even when they hurt other people, few of them are doing it just to hurt others, like Voldemort or Bellatrix Lestrange. They have their reasons. You can listen to those reasons and understand them.

“I want to protect them. I want to prevent people who hurt others from hurting them, of course, but I also want to forgive them, and find some way for them to go on living and forgive themselves, instead of just crumpling them up and putting them in Azkaban or someplace like that. Azkaban is such a waste. There’s so much potential in someone like Snape, whom people would dismiss just because he was a Death Eater at one point, or Draco, whom someone might dismiss because of his name and his family’s reputation, or Peter, whom everyone thought was a criminal.” Harry looked hard at Vera, willing her to understand. “I think that most people can heal of the damage they’ve done themselves and come back and change again. No one ever stops changing until they’re dead. And that means that everyone deserves as much freedom as possible, if they aren’t damaging other people’s freedom with it, so that they can make decisions as freely as possible. They should have lots of choices. They should have lots of paths. That applies to everyone. And my being a leader would cut paths off for people, because they would think they owed me obedience or something because of my power.” Harry snorted and shook his head. “Power’s only good if it’s used to give people choices and paths, not if it’s just—I don’t know, tossed around and shaped into pretty lights.”

Vera regarded him in silence for a long moment. Harry watched her back. She really did seem to understand, he thought, as the seconds passed in silence. He couldn’t do anything about the secrets she’d already discovered, but perhaps, if one person really did understand what he believed…

Then Vera said softly, “Everyone, Harry? Everyone deserves that?”

Harry frowned. “Perhaps your Sight is deficient, then,” he said. “Yes, everyone. Former Death Eaters included. I would have thought you would understand that, since you offered the Sanctuary to Peter.” He felt Peter’s hand close tightly on his wrist for a moment, but didn’t look at him. He was still irritated with him.

Vera came a few steps nearer and then sat down on the grass, not seeming to notice how cold and wet it was. Her eyes were gentle, deep with sadness.

“If everyone deserves that,” Vera whispered, “then why don’t you deserve it, Harry?”

Harry turned his head away from her.

“I was just asking,” said Vera. “It seems a simple question, Harry. You’re encouraging other people to be selfish, to a certain point, and discover all the wild beauty they can spin out of themselves. Why, then, don’t you want to discover what you can spin out of your own soul?”
“It’s different,” said Harry. “For me, it’s different.” Oh, Merlin, how he hated this. He felt as though someone were peeling his skin off in strips, leaving his soul exposed. *No, it would have to be something deeper than my soul. She’s already seen that.*

“Tell me how,” said Vera.

“If you’ve Seen it, why don’t you tell me?” Rudeness should make her go away, Harry thought. It worked on most people. It was one of his favorite distraction techniques. They would start getting angry at a rude person, and not think clearly, or decide that a rude, sullen person was not worth helping.

“All right,” said Vera.

*No! No, Merlin damn it, I didn’t mean to make her do that!* Harry whipped around again, not sure what he was going to do. Maybe there was a spell on his lips, maybe he was going to strike at Vera. He didn’t get a chance to find out, since Peter wrapped him tightly in his arms, and Harry couldn’t do anything that would also hurt Peter. He struggled miserably for a moment, but Peter held him fast.

“You really can’t fathom that you’re the same as anyone else,” said Vera, her voice low and relentless. “You don’t think you’re worthy of love unless you’re doing things for other people, and even then, you expect the love to be taken away the moment you fail a task or disappoint someone else. You want others to maintain their health, but if yours is worn down, you don’t care, as long as the wearing out benefits or frees another person. You’re willing to forgive others for the most extreme insults and harm against you, even abuse that should never be forgiven, but you castigate yourself to death for the slightest faults. You would intervene in a moment if you found someone else suffering what you did. For yourself, you see it as normal. You are interested in other people’s souls to the extent of drowning yourself in them, but you think that no one can know your own, because it’s ugly and uninteresting.” She paused. “I think that’s most of it, Harry, the core. You don’t really see yourself as human, do you?”

Merlin, this hurt, and Harry wanted her to stop. He caught his breath and did what he could to push the hurt away from himself, especially since Peter’s arms had tightened around Harry and he was making some absurd noise of horror. “Of course I do,” he said, throat so tight that it pained him to speak. “I have one head, two arms, two legs, eyes and nose and ears in the right place—"

Vera reached out and placed a hand on his forehead. “Harry,” she said. Her voice had a sound of tears. “You have never allowed yourself to heal. You have broken some webs and some barriers holding you back, but those are only some of them—in fact, the ones you have broken are almost all the ones that would prevent you from being of service to as many people as possible. You’ve turned your focus from serving your brother to serving others. You have not come to consider yourself worthy of rest, or peace, or relaxation, or love. And there is no reason for that, not the logical ones that you convince yourself are there. You know it, even, and that is why you did not want me to voice them aloud. Laid before you like that, you know they’re illogical.”

Harry twisted his head away from her hand, but then the only option was burying his face in Peter’s shoulder. He stiffened and held still instead. “You don’t understand,” he whispered, making sure they could both hear his words. “You’re wrong. It’s just—this is just the way it has to be.”

“It does not,” said Vera. “You cannot do *everything*, Harry, and no one expects that of you—save your mother, whom I would like to do more than slap.” Her voice deepened and darkened for a moment, then returned to normal. “You can indeed deserve what you would give others. And I think, when we leave, you will see that.”

Harry turned back around to stare at her. He had to resist the temptation to cuddle back into Peter. *I knew that would happen. I do want comfort, and that’s a weakness I can’t afford, now or ever.* “What do you mean?”

Vera raised her eyebrows. “Why, we are taking you back to the Sanctuary with us, of course,” she said. “Your soul is torn nearly in two. I do not need permission from my brothers and sisters in a case as bad as this. You need the rest and the peace that you can find there to keep from collapsing. And in a place where you can’t hide, you will have no way to avoid healing.”

Harry snarled. A wind blew past him, stinging his cheeks and stirring Vera’s neat bun, as his magic surged. “I won’t go,” he said.
“Because people need you here,” Vera surmised.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Are you not allowed to be selfish, then?” Vera asked. “Are you not allowed to think about what you need every once in a while, Harry?”

“Please stop talking to me that way,” said Harry.

“What way?”

“As if you actually cared. You can’t. You’re a stranger.”

“A Seer is no stranger to anyone she meets,” said Vera quietly. “Not when she can cast one glance and know your soul. And I’ve had to learn compassion across long years, since the first soul any Seer looks at is her own, and I was—rather wanting, then.” Her voice was wry. “I know that Peter told you Seers can’t lie, Harry. And I’m not lying now. I do want to take you back to the Sanctuary. I do think that you need to rest, and that the outside world can do without you for at least a month. And when the others gaze upon you, they will understand why I think so. There is no one in the Sanctuary who will not care for you, Harry.”

“Imagine it, Harry,” Peter said gently. “You can be with me and Remus. We’re reconciling, step by step. I mentioned that in my letter. I know he’d like to see you.”

Harry realized, abruptly, that part of him did want to go, rather savagely. But there was no way that he could let his commitments lapse like that.

“No,” he said.

“Harry—“ Vera began.

Harry’s head jerked abruptly to the side, and he gasped. Peter tightened his arms around him as if he were preparing to Apparate right there and there.

“Harry?” he said, somewhere beyond the distant, watery world of agony in which Harry was now immersed.

Harry felt as though a fishhook had lodged behind his cheekbone. He understood it a moment later. Draco needed him—didn’t just want his presence, but genuinely needed him. A moment after that, Harry could hear him screaming in intense pain, a sound that made Harry’s own ears ring and his body clench.

“I can’t,” he said, to Peter and Vera and anyone else who might be listening, and gathered himself, and jumped, pushing against the anti-Apparition wards as he headed straight to Draco’s side.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Julia Malfoy

Draco nodded decisively, and stood. One hand fingered the vials of dark potion in his pocket, but he quickly pulled it away and folded it casually across his chest, in case anyone should notice. Then he worried that either Blaise or Vince would notice that, and settled for a casual-sounding cough.

“It’s no good,” he announced. The lie he’d prepared didn’t roll off his lips as smoothly as he thought it should, after he’d practiced it in his head most of the day, but that was all right. Blaise gave him only a faintly interested glance, and Vince, bent over his own Charms homework, grunted. “I can’t find the information I’ll need in our textbook. I have to go the library.”

Vince grunted again. Blaise cocked his head. “For what subject?” he asked.

“I—what?” Somehow, Draco hadn’t got as far as planning that part out. His lie was designed to get him alone so that he could take the potion, not to stand up under close scrutiny.
“What subject are you looking for?” Blaise had caught the stuttering hesitation in his words, and was studying him curiously now, one finger poised between the pages of his book. Even Vince was looking up, blinking as if it took a lot of effort to recall his mind from the depths of his study. “I’m behind on Transfiguration. Maybe I could go with you and find some books, too.”

Draco managed to give a shaky snort. He hoped Blaise wouldn’t pick up on the fact that it was shaky, but knew that was a little too much to expect. Blaise had been Sorted into Slytherin for a reason. “It’s not Transfiguration,” he said, rather than make up a subject.

Silence. Blaise raised his eyebrows, and when Draco said nothing, he smiled. “Well? What subject is it, then?”

Draco scowled at him. “Herbology, if you must know.”

That cured the problem. Blaise had no use for Herbology, and had got his last three detentions for mimicking Professor Sprout behind her back. He shrugged and turned back to his book. Draco huffed and made for the door.

“Draco?”

Wondering when in the name of sanity his roommates had started paying so much attention to his business, Draco summoned a sickly smile and turned around to look at Vince. “Yes?”

“Are you all right?” Vince asked.

Draco sighed as he eyed the other boy. Vince was being more perceptive this year, now that he didn’t have Greg around to absorb most of his attention. Draco just wished he would be perceptive at someone else. “I am,” he said. “I just don’t like being behind in Herbology, of all subjects, and I wish that the professors wouldn’t assign us homework on bloody Halloween.”

Vince, apparently reassured, nodded at him and then tackled Charms again with a heavily furrowed brow. Greg would have helped him if he were here, Draco knew. Greg was marginally better in Charms, and the two had been close enough friends to help each other in every subject.

But Draco had something more important to do than help anyone with random homework assignments or feel random pangs of guilt, so he slipped out of the room and through the common room. To his delight, Pansy wasn’t among the Slytherin students sprawled lazily on couches and practicing spells or writing essays or discussing professional Quidditch. She was the only other one who’d been watching him closely enough this year that she’d probably notice Draco’s distraction.

_Odd, how I notice that, now_, Draco thought, as he ducked out of the dungeons. _I didn’t really think about Pansy that much for the last few weeks._

Well, the potion was made.

Draco wondered if it was odd that his attention had managed to turn so effectually to other things when that potion was finished, and then shrugged. In a few hours, he’d have far different concerns. He was confident that he could summon Julia and gain the power from her that he’d need to be equal to Harry.

And then, Harry wouldn’t need to look anywhere else ever again for comfort and love, the way that he did now with those stupid lessons and the hours he spent chatting with people Draco didn’t like and knew were beneath him, like that prat Smith. He wouldn’t feel that Draco was unworthy of him in any way. And Draco wouldn’t feel like he had to cringe in Harry’s shadow, either. Things could finally be the way they were meant to be, as a relationship of equals.

He patted the potion vials in his pocket and quickened his pace. He knew the perfect place to summon a Malfoy spirit. The research in the library had provided him with more information than just the clues to making the potion and which ancestor he should choose for his calling.

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Draco took a final look around the hidden room, and then nodded. Yes, he was right, and the books had been right. No one
had disturbed this place since the last time a Malfoy had been here, his great-grandfather. He let the door fall shut with a little snick, and stepped forward into the center of the place.

Superficially, this was only one of Hogwarts’ many abandoned rooms. To a Malfoy’s eyes, though, it was far more. Even as Draco watched, soft wards and sigils lit up on the walls, streaming power in brilliant flames of blue-gray, the color of their old crest, the color of the stone the Manor was built of. They whispered *welcome* to him in a voice that purred down his spine.

One of the few things that he would never envy Harry, Draco thought as he extracted the vials from his pocket, was his blood family. They didn’t care anything for him, or they did but were extremely remiss about showing it. Draco had never had to doubt that his parents loved him, and that he came from one of the most important wizarding families in Great Britain.

*I’ll make that family proud tonight,* he thought, as his gaze locked on the center of the floor. There was no circle visible there, but he could feel the pressure of power, building almost to pain, that said there had once been. His great-grandfather would have conducted experiments on prisoners for Grindelwald there, though so secretly that no one had ever figured out the identity of Grindelwald’s prime torturer. Draco had only been able to put it together because of family stories combined with the hints and tinges of fancy in the books.

He drew his wand from his robe pocket opposite to the one where he’d put the vials, and held it out in front of him.

“Circino!”

*See, Harry, I do so listen,* he thought smugly as the spell blazed a circle into the stones, shining the same blue-gray color as the wards. If one wasn’t going to be a necromancer and make the sacrifices—like not speaking more than twice a year—that Pansy’s father had, then they had to draw a circle to contain the summoned spirit. Draco had read the books, and listened when Harry lectured him about it. He wasn’t going to be careless. He knew that Julia’s power would raise him in many people’s eyes, and lead to enough risks of its own after he had it. He certainly wouldn’t just snatch it sloppily as he went about getting it.

*That’s the thing Harry doesn’t understand,* he thought sadly as he drew out the silver goblets he’d written home for and begged his mother prettily to send him. *He doesn’t know what having that much magic really means. He doesn’t see the way people half-bow to him even when he’s standing still and not looking in their direction. Well, I know it, and once I have that power, I can defend him and let him do what he wants with his own magic.*

That was so agreeable to Draco that he spent a moment daydreaming about it before he uncorked the first vial, the one that held the thicker version of the potion, and filled one of the silver goblets with it. Then he filled the second goblet with the lighter, thinner portion. It steamed as he poured it, and a thin tendril of silver smoke curled up over the lip of the goblet towards him.

*Patience, patience,* Draco thought at it, shaking his head, and then closed his eyes and made an effort to calm himself down. It was difficult, when he knew the culmination of his dreams for the last several months waited just a few inches away.

Annoyingly, when he cleared his mind, the voices he heard were his mother’s and Harry’s, not exclaiming in wonder over his newfound magic, but encouraging him to wait, to promise that he wouldn’t drink the potion.

Draco snorted and opened his eyes. He *had* kept his promise to Harry. Harry had asked him to wait when he made the potion. Draco *had* waited, and hadn’t used it on Halloween morning. But it was Halloween night now, and he had to drink it in just a few minutes if he wanted to be able to summon Julia Malfoy’s ghost and negotiate her power out of her before the night ended.

His mother…Draco winced. Well. He was still breaking his promise to her, and using the potion on this night of all nights. But she was pureblood. She would understand when he emerged from this and explained the full implications of what he’d done. She had always wanted his happiness and his calm, clear, secure future. Draco was only taking a few extra steps to claim that future for himself. She would understand once she saw how he had become a Malfoy magical heir and made himself a worthy partner for Harry in one go.

He stepped forward, careful not to touch and therefore smudge the glowing blue-gray line of the circle, and set the goblet with the lighter portion of the potion inside it. Then he lifted his goblet and saluted the circle.

“Julia Malfoy,” he said, invoking the spirit he wanted by name. “I am your descendant, Draco Malfoy, and I ask your
compliance and attendance.” He swallowed the thick potion all at once.

The potion gushed down his throat, seeming to move faster than he could possibly have swallowed it. Draco expected to gag, but he didn’t. What happened was that his stomach surged and then fell still, and his sight began to shimmer along the edges. Suddenly the blue-gray light seemed much more present and clear than he remembered it, and the stone became less solid. It felt as if he were dreaming.

He saw the goblet inside the circle tilt, and the lighter half of the potion ran out into an invisible mouth.

Draco hissed under his breath. This was it, then. He had reached out, and it had been up to his ancestress to respond. Obviously, she’d wanted to. He smiled, and a flash of buoyant confidence passed through him. He sat down calmly outside the circle and waited for her to show up.

Trails of silver smoke like the one that had circled the rim of the second goblet rose and began to twine around each other. Draco watched in fascination as they mingled and nuzzled each other like serpents mating, and then linked together so thickly that he could not make out the space that had been between them just a moment before. Then he realized that the snakes, together, formed a woman’s slender, pale arm.

Draco swallowed. The taste of the potion still lingered on his tongue, heavy and thick.

Other trails of smoke formed other body parts, all floating independently of each other: another arm, an ankle, a hand, several fingers, a nose. Draco found himself looking down, not wanting to see what would happen if Julia materialized naked. But he snapped his head up quickly enough when the silver images all collided, and then the specter of a woman floated there, just barely colored in.

Draco caught his breath. Julia Malfoy was smaller than he had thought she would be, but then, people tended to be smaller back then, weren’t they? What mattered was that she stood proud and slender, her chin lifted, and her blue eyes fixed on him with full understanding. Down her back cascaded a wave of silvery hair with a subtle, unnatural shimmer to it. She wore an old-fashioned silvery gown, or maybe that was only the way the smoke made it seem. She didn’t look much like him, or Lucius, but his father would have approved anyway. She was very Malfoyish.

Draco licked his lips and hoped the spell had worked as it should, letting Julia understand his language. He knew she had spoken a different variety of English then, and he wouldn’t trust his Latin with a woman who probably spoke it natively. “I—hello. I’m Draco Malfoy. You know who I am?”

For a moment, Julia stood motionless, her head tilted as though she were listening to a distant echo instead of his voice. But then her eyes fixed on his face, and she nodded rapidly, the motion almost heron-like in its fluidity.

“You are my many-times-distant-son,” she said, her voice as ethereal as her hair was. “Or you could not have summoned me. We must be bound by direct ties of blood.”

Draco smiled. He’d been a little overawed by her at first, but that was changing as he saw how firmly she stayed within the circle. In fact, its sides flared with blue-grayish power when Julia drifted towards them, and chased her back into the middle. He was obviously in control here, and the necromantic magic had worked just fine, damn Harry and his objections. “Yes,” he said. “I’m a descendant of your son Octavius.” That just made Julia raise her eyebrows at him, and Draco was reminded of Professor McGonagall. He pushed the thought away. It wasn’t a comfortable one to have when he was supposed to be becoming an adult. “I used a potion that would make me a magical heir of someone in my family, since I can’t be my father’s, and I turned up your spirit as being in sympathy-song with mine. So I called you.”

Julia regarded him in silence again for a long time. Now, Draco was rather reminded of Harry. He forced himself not to fidget, though. He hadn’t had his childhood training for nothing.

“You want my magic,” she said.

“‘To be your magical heir, yes,’” said Draco, and nodded. Then he stopped nodding. He was sure that too many wild, uncontrolled motions of his head on his neck were making him look like an idiot. “I knew you were a Lady, or powerful enough to be a Lady. I’d like to be the heir of someone powerful.”

“How do you want this strength?” Julia asked softly.
“I’m in love with someone who’s going to be a Lord,” said Draco. “Or, well, he could be a Lord, but he doesn’t want to. Right now, anyway.” He would have to see if he could get Harry to change his mind about that. Lords had traditionally taken paths that were above politics most of the time. Harry was too blindly noble to do so, but he would have to listen to Draco once he had the same kind of magic Harry did. “I want to make sure that I can protect and support him as an equal. It would kill him to love someone who wasn’t an equal partner to him. Kill us both, really.”

Once again, Julia scrutinized him. Draco wondered what was taking her so long. She could easily enough have said yes or no by now. Of course, she would have to say yes, so why was she taking so bloody long to make up her mind?

“Binding this person to you would improve the fortunes of our family?” Julia asked.

*What—Oh. I should have known she would care about that.* This was, after all, the woman who had seduced her own brother to keep the Malfoy line going forward and to spare her brother from the shame of having an illegitimate child or a cast-off wife. “Yes,” said Draco. “Yes, it would. There are two other Lords alive right now, but they’re blinded by each other, locked in this stupid struggle of Light and Dark. Harry has the power to break the deadlock. He’ll change the world. And I think the Malfoys should stand with him. I’m his best friend. I’m going to be his lover, in time. I promise you, I’m doing this for my own advantage, but it’s not going to hurt our family.” He smiled at Julia, and tried to make his tone coaxing. “And we’ve had a magical heir in the direct descent for the last thirteen generations.”

“Perhaps that has been long enough,” said Julia softly.

Draco blinked at her. “Why would you say that?” he protested. “Don’t you want the honor and glory of the Malfoys to go on?”

“Not at the price of dishonor,” said Julia. “Tell me, child, why did you choose me in particular? Was it because of a true sympathy between your soul and mine, or because of the power that I wielded?”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “You sounded similar to me. I know that you were subtle and cunning and careful about how you used your power. I would be, too. I want it mostly to protect Harry and to assure the fortunes of our family. I promise.”

“Tell me, child,” said Julia, “why do you think I never declared myself a Lady?”

“Well,” said Draco, “because you could get more done working behind the scenes. And besides, I thought Lords and Ladies at that time who declared themselves got wound up in all sorts of petty battles.” *Sort of like the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. Maybe I don’t want Harry to declare himself a Lord after all, if that stupidity would overtake him.* “You did things with cunning, like the way that you seduced your brother. A Dark Lady would be too open for that.”

Julia’s eyes narrowed, and her lips pinched. It took Draco a moment to realize she was smiling. She was one of the few people he had ever met who didn’t smile by showing her teeth. “So I would have declared myself a Dark Lady, but for my need to convince others I was harmless,” she said.

Draco nodded. “I can do the same thing. I don’t need to be a Dark Lord to be happy. I just need Harry, and to be equal to Harry, and to know that he respects and loves me as much as I do him.”

Julia closed her eyes. “Child,” she breathed, “you have badly misjudged my character.”

Draco stared at her. *No. That isn’t possible.* “If you weren’t in sympathy with me,” he said aloud, “you wouldn’t have responded. So I got that part right.”

Julia pinned him with a fathomless stare. “Child—”

“*Don’t call me that.*”

“You are worthy of no other title,” said Julia, with maddening calm. “Child, this is Halloween, the night when spirits are strongest. I was able to cross the barriers because I chose to answer your call. I was curious, and I thought that one of my own blood who would call me out of my long rest must have a compelling reason to do so.” She narrowed her eyes. “Imagine my displeasure when I find out that that is not the case.”
Draco sprang to his feet and watched as she floated towards the edge of the circle. “But I made the circle,” he whispered.

Julia broke the blue-gray light with a wave of her hand. At once, Draco fell to his knees, clutching his head. He could sense the magic around her, buzzing, singing swarms of power. The circle had dimmed it before, but it was abundantly clear now that Julia had only been staying in those confines because she had wanted to.

And she had most definitely been a Lady in life, declared or not. Draco had no doubt that this power was the strength of someone who could destroy him with another wave of her hand, if she chose. Dumbledore’s power was familiar, Harry’s comforting. This was like being locked in a room with a wild panther, a beast that already had iron claws fastened around his temples.

He could feel his heart beating fast in his ears, his breath coming noisy in his lungs, with terror.

“Understand,” Julia whispered. “If I had declared myself Lady of anything, it would have been of the Light.”

Draco rolled on his back and stared up at her. He didn’t know when he’d dropped to the floor, but there he was, and there Julia was, hovering over him, the air around her flaring with fire.

“Oh,” said Julia, “not that I particularly wanted to, or that that was where my first inclinations lay. But it was a matter of necessity. Before any of my other magic awoke but the most minor accidental mishaps, there was one particular gift, at the foundation of it all. That gift wouldn’t let me choose any other set of ideals but the Light. I would have destroyed myself if I tried.”

She smiled at Draco. “I don’t particularly want to go rampaging around Hogwarts,” she said. “Lords and children who should not have developed their power so young, faugh. I will return to my rest. On the other hand, I have no wish to let you go without granting you a gift, Draco. That was what you wished for, wasn’t it? To be my magical heir?”

Draco watched, beyond fear now, as Julia dipped a hand into the pocket of her silvery gown and drew out something like a swarm of silver singing bees.

“You need to learn manners,” she said. “And patience, and consideration for the feelings of others. I would not have it said that my heir was without any of those qualities. I think your lover will appreciate it, too. This is not Lord-level power, but it did teach me more than any other ability I possessed about moving in the world.”

She blew on her hand, and the swarm of bees soared across the air and towards him like a puff of dandelion down, falling on and curling around his shoulders.

“Enjoy the gift, Draco,” she said. “Make me proud, my heir.” Then she vanished, and the blue-gray light went with her.

Draco lay there in the darkness for a moment, breathing—

And then claws dug into his brain, sculpting it, twitching and twisting it into new pathways, and bees stung his skin, and swords scraped along his spine, and unfamiliar fluff pressed close on his arms, and he screamed, and screamed, and fainted for a moment, caught in the overwhelming pain.

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“Hush, Draco. It’s all right. Wake up. I’m here now.”

Draco forced his eyes open slowly, sobbing, and found Harry there. Harry held him close, and his magic flooded the room, chasing away the lingering pain of Julia’s. Draco felt it swarm him, drape him, hold him close.

The pain ceased at once. Draco let his head fall back with a grateful gasp. He breathed around the tears, and managed to whisper, “What was that? What did she give me?”

“She?” Harry’s hands went tight on his body. “Draco—you summoned Julia, didn’t you? You bloody idiot. I told you to wait!”

“I waited,” Draco protested. He winced, and touched his head. It was throbbing, and not with the pain of suddenly released
magic. *What gift did she give me?* “I waited until I knew you were in the meeting, and then I summoned her. I didn’t know that she was going to do *that*.”

“What did she do?” Harry shifted Draco so that he sat with his head on one of Harry’s shoulders, Harry’s arm wrapped tightly around his upper back. Harry was still smaller than Draco was, but the presence of his magic served to make him effectively larger. “I felt your pain through that spell I’ve been using to keep track of when you need me, but you don’t have any physical wounds.”

“Mental,” Draco whispered. “Something mental. It has to be.” He felt a growing irritation against his ancestress, and he concentrated on it to distract himself from his fear, and the chant in the back of his mind that told him he’d done a very, very, very stupid thing.

Harry gently gripped and lifted his chin, locking his eyes with Draco’s. “You trust me to use Legilimency?”

Draco swallowed and nodded. He didn’t think it could hurt worse than the pain Julia had inflicted on him.

Harry murmured the spell, and his eyes went wide and dreamy. Draco watched his face while he stared in silence. Harry looked as if he’d suffered some massive shock, and, sweet Merlin, had the circles around his eyes always been *that* pronounced? It didn’t look as though he’d been getting *any* sleep.

*That’s nonsense, the last time I looked at him he—*

Draco caught his breath. *And when was the last time I really looked at him? When was the last time I really touched him, except to yank him around? When was the last time we talked about anything other than the blasted potion?* For the first time, he could see the last two months as they were, without a veil over them. What he saw appalled him. He’d demanded Harry’s company and interest in the potion, and everything he’d wanted, he got. But Harry wasn’t normally the type to be that compliant with anyone.

*Of course he’s not. But he’s exactly the type to figure out what you want and give it to you, while concealing his other actions. He risked his own life first year to defend his brother like the Muggle wanted. And who knows what he’s been doing this time? I haven’t exactly been paying enough attention to him to notice.*

*Oh, Merlin, I’m such an idiot.*

Draco shuddered once and brought his own arms up to wrap fiercely around Harry. *Shit. Oh, shit. He could have died, and I was too wrapped up in that potion and that bloody book to notice.*

Harry let out a surprised little grunt, but didn’t break his tranced gaze into Draco’s eyes. A moment later, he leaned back from him, stared him in the face, and sighed.

“What?” Draco demanded. “What is it?”

“You’re not going to like this,” said Harry reluctantly. “Not if that’s what I think it is. Look—focus on me for a moment.”

*Not a hard task,* Draco thought, and did what he should have been doing all along.

Harry narrowed his eyes, and then Draco jumped as a quick wave of heat seemed to assault his face, like a sudden wash of sunburn. He held up a hand in front of him, but the air didn’t feel hot. It was just—heat, on his cheeks and his forehead and his eyebrows.

Then the heat went away. Harry rubbed his face with one hand.

“What?” Draco demanded again.

“You felt that because I was feeling angry,” said Harry quietly. “I let a bit of my anger out from behind my Occlumency shields. She’s made you into an empath, Draco, the kind who senses emotions as physical sensations on your skin.” He shook his head. “How do you manage to *do* these things to yourself?”
“So says the master of changing his life around,” said Draco, but it was empty sarcasm. His mind was reeling. This couldn’t be true. He’d heard about empaths. They were—they were soggy. They were people who felt it when some little girl lost her kitten, or when some soppy witch broke up with her boyfriend, or when a first-year cried because she was away from home for the first time and scared. And while they could block out the emotions, they couldn’t forget they’d felt them. They usually turned out to be disgustingly kind and helpful to the people who’d been hurting, even if it was just to cure the pain so they wouldn’t feel it anymore, or to spread joy and happiness so that they could bask in that instead.

He remembered what Julia had said only too well, though.

*You need to learn manners. And patience, and consideration for the feelings of others.*

“She did,” Draco moaned, and put his head in his hands. “I’m fucked.”

“What’s more,” said Harry, his voice going dry, “you can feel emotional impressions left behind on objects, if they’re strong enough. I think you must have been feeling the echoes of pain once practiced in this room. It was a torture chamber, wasn’t it?”

Draco shuddered. “Does that mean that I’m going to start feeling them again the moment you and your magic move away from me?”

“No,” said Harry. “I can teach you how to shield, or weave temporary shields for you myself. But it’s quite a strong gift, Draco. I suspect Julia was an empath who was never quite able to escape the feelings she received from the people around her.”

No wonder she couldn’t declare herself a Dark Lady, Draco thought in misery. And I—

“Harry, will you ever respect me?” he whispered. “I wanted to be your equal so that you would respect me, but now I’m going to be wet, and I’m going to hurt when other people hurt, and it’s ridiculous, and I can’t believe she did this to me—“

Heat blasted his arms. Harry yanked himself away abruptly and stood, pacing around the room and waving his hands. Draco winced and put his hands up in front of his face, which, of course, did not stop the feeling that his eyebrows were being cooked.

But Harry could shield his rage behind Occlumency shields.

Unless he was really, really angry with me.

Draco swallowed.

“You were so bloody stupid,” said Harry, in a growl that was building towards a roar. “I asked you not to do this. Your mother asked you not to do this. I trusted you not to do this, Draco.” He turned and glared at him. Draco cowered.

“And now you did it,” said Harry, “and it’s changed the rest of your life. It’s always going to be there. And I have to take care of you, and, Merlin, how am I going to do that on top of the million other things I have to do? I have half a mind to just leave you to stew in the emotions you’re receiving, and burst into tears every time you pass someone who just failed an exam. It would be what you deserve, for doing this to yourself, and to me, and to other people.” He blew out a hard enough breath to make his fringe shiver and show his scar. Draco blinked and touched the center of his forehead. A faint pain was there.

“Harry,” he said.

His voice must have been soft enough to get Harry’s attention through the tirade, because Harry glared at him. “Yes?”

“Have you been having nightmares about the Dark Lord again?” Draco asked. *And how in the world didn’t I notice?* Guilt was gnawing out a comfortable hole for itself in his stomach.

Harry’s face was wiped clear of emotion in a second, and the hot, prickly sensation on Draco’s arms and face faded. What replaced it was a slick, slimy coolness that Draco was pretty sure was fear. Harry took a step back from Draco, watching him closely.
“Do you know what you have done to yourself?” he whispered.

“About what he deserves, I would say, Harry.”

Draco jumped and looked over Harry’s shoulder. A plain witch was coming through the door, shaking her head and clucking her tongue at nothing in particular. Her looks were nothing to owl home about, but her gaze was piercing, and Draco felt uncomfortable underneath it.

“Empathy,” said the stranger. “Yes, and Merlin knows, he needs it. About time that cramped little soul opened up to other people’s experiences. He’s been selfish for too long.” Draco wondered, indignantly, whose soul she was calling cramped.

“I have to shield him—” Harry began.

“Teach him how to shield,” said the stranger. “Then set him to researching empaths. Let him learn how to use that gift, since he’s not about to get rid of it. My name is Vera, and I’m a Seer,” she added, on catching Draco’s blank expression. “And I would snatch you both away to our Sanctuary and show you how to shield and teach Harry how to rest, if I didn’t think it would do you more good to be here, and that Harry won’t leave without you.”

“I don’t need to be taught how to rest.” Harry was radiating prickly heat all down Draco’s arms and face again.

But to Draco, what mattered the most was another part of her little speech. He looked at Harry, who was glaring at the witch with his arms folded. That didn’t conceal the deep exhaustion around his eyes, or the way he hunched in on himself as if he would roll up into a ball like a hedgehog any moment. Not anymore.

Draco bit his lip. Both his mother and father had taught him about what to do when he was in the wrong. Apologize only if he really must. Apologies didn’t mean anything.

Atonement does.

After his father had been caught acting as a Death Eater, he couldn’t just say that he was sorry and get on with things. He’d had to show that he was an upstanding member of the wizarding community: get involved with Hogwarts, influence the Ministry in acceptably subtle ways, donate money to St. Mungo’s and similar. He’d had to actually change the way he acted.

And if Harry wouldn’t leave and go to this Sanctuary place without him, then the least Draco could do was change the way he acted.

“I’ll take care of him,” he said quietly to the Seer. Vera glanced at him again, and Draco still didn’t like her gaze, but he did like the way she nodded to him.

“Don’t be an idiot, Draco,” said Harry. “I’m taking care of you. I need to shield you, and it’s obvious you can’t be trusted to keep yourself out of trouble for one red-hot second—”

“We’ll take care of each other, then,” said Draco, and thought he could stand now. He focused on Harry, and supposed that the wash of cool air coming over him was surprise. He smiled. He thought he could get to like it.

He decided to speak as if the Seer wasn’t in the room. For what he wanted to say to Harry, it didn’t matter if they had an audience or not.

“I wanted a Lord’s power so that I could have a partnership with you that was absolutely equal, Harry,” Draco told him. “And so that I could protect you and take care of you. But Julia didn’t give that to me. And I made stupid mistakes in trying to acquire it, so I won’t try any more.”

Although if another way comes along...

Draco pushed the thought out of his head. Change, remember? “I have this empathy instead,” he said, staring into Harry’s eyes. “I know that you don’t feel you can trust me right now.” Distrust was another uncomfortable feeling, like stepping on sticks with his bare feet. “But I promise you, you can always trust me to protect you and defend you and be your friend. And if I ever feel anything from you that says I haven’t done that, now I can correct myself right away.”
“But—” Harry started to protest.

“If it’s about not wanting to impose on me, stuff it,” said Draco. “Everyone’s going to be imposing on me equally, at least until I can learn to control this damn ability. I did this to myself, and I’ll have to learn to live with it.

“If it’s about not wanting me to care for you, I don’t want to hear that, either. I’ve always cared for you, Harry, except for these last two months, and I really am sorry about that.” There. Now the cool feeling of surprise was back—well, more like an icy gale on his face, really. That would be shock, then. “I was a prat, a git, a brat, whatever other names you’d like to call me.

“I don’t expect you to spend all your time teaching me. I’m going to teach myself a lot of it.” If only so I can be sure that Harry isn’t overworking himself using some shield technique that drains him. “I wanted to be a magical heir to someone in my family, and I am. I wanted to be more powerful, and I am. I can’t really complain. I got what I wanted.” He smiled, and knew it was faint, but these next words were so important, and it hurt to say them. “I—I’m not your absolute equal in power, but I hope that you’ll still consent to regard me as your friend.”

Harry stared at him intently. His eyes cut more deeply than the Seer’s did. Draco met him gaze for gaze. He meant what he said. He would invite Harry to use Legilimency on him if he wanted to be absolutely sure.

Harry whispered, “I need to enter your mind and show you how to shield.”

“Of course,” said Draco, and dropped his barriers, meeting Harry’s eyes as he whispered Legilimens again.

Harry was in his mind in a moment, delicately spinning shields out of images of quicksilver, showing Draco how he overlaid them on certain aspects of his mind so that his magic was contained but not frozen; a solid container was bad. Harry would drape the pools on their targets for right now. It would cost him no effort to maintain them. It would be up to Draco, after this, to study and figure out how to do it for himself, and how to let the barriers part so that he could use his gift when he wanted.

If, of course, Draco was going to do that.

Draco took the opportunity to marshal his own emotions, and keep them patiently back until Harry was done with the shields. Then he sprang them on Harry, so that Harry could not doubt what he felt.

Patience. Trust. True repentance, and the promise to do better. Friendship. Love. Agony that he hadn’t seen what was happening to Harry earlier. Anger against the stupidity of his concern with the potion. Pleading, because Draco couldn’t stifle that, and because he didn’t want Harry to break off their friendship—but neither did he want Harry to forgive him just because this was Harry and Harry forgave everybody. He wanted to know how low he had fallen in his friend’s eyes, and how far he would have to climb to work himself back up.

It was terrifying. It was exhilarating. It was fine, because he was doing this in his mind, and Harry was the only one who could see it, and Draco did not mind, at least in this moment, about Harry seeing everything.

He felt Harry’s wonder, and his shock, and then he drew back. Draco opened his eyes, blinked, and looked steadily at his friend.

Harry had his head cocked on one side, like that phoenix of his, studying Draco as if he’d never seen him before. Then he slowly, slowly nodded. “All right,” he whispered. “I—it might take some time before I can trust that you’re not going to annihilate yourself, Draco, but I’ll have to trust you, because I’ve got too many other things to do. I can’t follow you around all the time to make sure you keep your promises.”

Draco nodded, and refused to blurt out his disappointment at that verdict. He couldn’t. It wouldn’t be fair. If he was ever to come to matter to Harry more than, and not just as much as, all his other duties and obligations, then it would have to be by his own efforts.

*His brother redeemed himself in Harry’s eyes. I’m not going to say that that bloody prat can do anything better than I can.*

“Better results than I expected when I followed you here.” Vera broke quietly in again. “I must ask you, Harry, if you won’t
reconsider coming to the Sanctuary. A month alone would do you wonders.”

Harry looked at her and shook his head.

“May I ask why?” Vera’s voice was soft enough to sound like floating dandelion fluff, and Draco saw tears edging her eyes.

“I do have things to do here,” said Harry. “But that’s only part of the reason. The other part is that I don’t want to constantly be around people who can see me all the time, in a way that I can’t see them. I’ve spent long enough with people who could control me, who had some advantage over me that I couldn’t counter. Not ever again.”

“Draco will be able to see part of you that no one else does, now,” said Vera. Draco wondered, for a moment furious, why she’d brought that up—to try and coax Harry along with her, or just because it was true?

Harry blinked. “But he’s Draco,” he said. “And I trust him.”

Draco had to turn his head away, or he was going to have an impossibly improper and soppy expression on his face. He furtively wiped at his eyes, and wondered if Harry would ever know how much those words had meant to him.

“I see,” said Vera. “Well. I will not convince you to come along against your will, Harry.”

“You seemed pretty damn determined to try, earlier.” Harry said that in a snarl.

“My apologies, there,” said Vera. “I simply assumed that once you heard about what your soul looked like and what the Sanctuary was, you would of course want to come.” She sighed, a light sound. “Please remember that the Sanctuary is always open to you. For the school holidays, or the summer.”

“I have a guardian,” said Harry, in a hedgehog-voice.

Vera said nothing else that Draco could hear. The door opened and shut behind her, though.

“Draco?” Harry said a moment later.

Draco turned and faced his friend, and saw that his eyes had deepened with such intensity as to almost change their color. “Yes?” he asked. He couldn’t not have, with that look coming at him.

“I have to know that you mean it,” said Harry. “That you’re really going to work at learning empathy and shielding. If you backslide on me now, I won’t be able to trust you again.”

Draco lifted his hand and held it up in front of him, palm presented to Harry. “I swear it,” he said. “On my honor as a Malfoy, by Merlin and my magic.” He paused, searching Harry’s face, and found what he needed there. “On my honor as your friend.”

Then he stretched out his hand in front of him, in the simple sort of gesture he and Harry hadn’t shared in so long, and waited.

Harry sidled close to him, still looking like a wild, bruised thing, and then clasped his hand.

And then he actually moved even closer and hugged Draco, his body going totally relaxed for a moment. Draco held him close, exulting, well aware of how fragile this was and what might happen to shatter it, as Harry whispered, “I missed you.”

Thank you, he thought fervently, to Harry and perhaps even to Julia. Thank you for giving me a second chance. I promise, I won’t screw this one up.

“I missed you, too,” he whispered.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine: Explosions
Harry dreamed.

“Welcome home, my lord.” Bellatrix’s voice was soft and exultant as she steadied the small throne on the ground. “Oh, welcome home at last.”

Voldemort’s hissing laughter came from the center of the chair. Harry still couldn’t see him, though he could see Bellatrix and the chair better in the dim half-light of dawn than he had in his last vision. He snuck around them in a circle, watching carefully. He still didn’t think he was actually present, but this area where they had landed was more open than the forest where Harry had seen them last time. Harry could see a long stretch of empty beach plunging down to meet the water, and beyond that, a waste of equally empty downs.

Nagini slithered around the chair, and hissed something that Harry’s ears translated as, “Are you comfortable, dear Master?”

“Always, with you near;” Voldemort hissed back. Parseltongue didn’t sound that much different from English to Harry, at least while he was speaking it, but Voldemort’s voice managed to make the innocent snake language sound foul and perverse. He gave a little shudder that made his fur bristle, and kept watching.

“We must move,” Voldemort told Bellatrix. “Nagini needs a warm place, and so will I. And then—then the sun.” He was laughing again, and Harry fixed his eyes on the ground, the soft sand beneath his paws, so that he wouldn’t have to watch the expression on Bellatrix’s face when she listened to the laughter. She looked as if she considered it richest music.

“Yes, my lord,” the Death Eater said, and scooped up the chair. Harry stared despite himself at the end of her right wrist. It was capped with—something. He thought it was not a hand, but it shimmered and flexed like moonlight on water, and it obviously gripped like a hand even if it wasn’t one.

The dream moved on, tracking Voldemort and Bellatrix and Nagini across the sand, and Harry perforce followed. The pain in the center of his forehead was growing worse, but he didn’t know why. This scene was almost peaceful.

Until they climbed the first down off the beach, of course, and met a Muggle walking alone, whistling to himself. He paused and stared at Bellatrix with his mouth open.

Nagini killed him, since Bellatrix’s hands were rather occupied. Harry supposed it was a more merciful death than he could have had, given how Bellatrix liked to torture her victims, but it hardly mattered as he watched Nagini’s teeth and coils bear down, and heard the quick scream the Muggle gave before that was choked off. And watching Bellatrix tear a bit from the body and bring it back to feed to the invisible thing in the chair was almost more than Harry could stand.

“Welcome home, my lord,” Bellatrix murmured again, making a motion as though she were wiping at milk on a child’s cheek. Harry highly doubted that this was anything so innocent as milk. “Welcome home at last.”

Harry felt the pain in his scar grow to the point where he could feel it blazing through into reality, and then he burst back to himself, gasping and grabbing at his forehead, with the knowledge that Voldemort had returned to Britain.

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Draco opened his eyes sharply. He didn’t know why. He’d been dreaming one moment, quite comfortably ensconced in a place that had the best features of Malfoy Manor and Florean Fortescue’s mixed together, and now he was in his bed with his forehead tingling—

His forehead.

Draco swallowed and carefully pushed the curtains of his bed back. He had discovered in the past few days that he could ignore most emotions as ghost sensations, unless they were very strong or they came from Harry. He had a good idea why his forehead was hurting now.

He padded quietly over to Harry’s bed, since a quick Tempus check told him it was still only six in the morning, and twitched on Harry’s curtain. He heard a quick, startled breath, then the rustling that meant Harry was turning over and trying to pretend he was still asleep.

Draco leaned in and glared at his friend. Harry’s face was relaxed, his mouth slightly parted as though in wonder at a dream.
He’d even got his eyes darting back and forth under his eyelids in pursuit of the imaginary vision. But he hadn’t thought to clean off the trail of blood that had run down his cheek.

“Harry,” Draco hissed at him. “I know that you’re awake, damn you. Open your eyes and talk to me.”

Harry still tried to pretend for a moment, and then he rolled over and blinked at Draco, one hand rising as though to cover a yawn—and, just incidentally, shield the trail of blood from view. “Hi, Draco,” he said. “What are you doing awake so early? Did you have a bad dream?”

“For the love of Merlin.” Draco crawled onto Harry’s bed and let the curtains fall shut behind him. “Look. This is stupid. We’ve had a few days to get used to this now, and that means that you know I have empathy, and I know I have empathy, and I’ve memorized your words to me. You said that you didn’t mind me being able to see your emotions because it was me. Was that a lie?” He could feel hurt rising, but he shoved it away, in favor of being angry. Showing pain would just make Harry that more likely to lie.

“No,” said Harry, blinking as if he couldn’t understand how their conversation had taken this sudden turn. “I do trust you, Draco, you know that. I trust you more than anyone else.”

Draco wanted to crow in glee, but instead he put the words away to admire at a later time. “Then start bloody well acting like it, Harry,” he muttered, and plucked at the sheets. “You trust me, and you know that I can feel your dreams, anyway. Why do you pretend that you’re not having them?”

Harry’s shoulders hunched, making him look like a turtle. Or a coward. Draco thought about it for a moment, then told him so.

Harry stared at him in sheer astonishment. Draco squinted and felt out through his shields, still a tedious process, like groping about for his wand in a darkened room. Yes, there was the faint sensation of cold wind on his face. Harry really was shocked. “I’m not—I didn’t even know you might say that to me,” Harry muttered.

“Good,” said Draco. “Then maybe you’ll listen to other things I say, too. This is getting ridiculous. I made some promises, and I’m trying my best to act on them, Harry, but I want promises from you, too. Are you going to make me go through this silly charade every time you have a dream, which I can feel, or are you going to simply confess and tell me when you have one?”

“I’ll tell you if they wake you up,” Harry tried to bargain.

“Every time,” Draco insisted.

Harry frowned at him. Draco raised an eyebrow and waited. Harry had been acting slightly different in the past few days, as though someone had told him something that he wanted to take into consideration, but he was too obviously searching for a way back. Draco understood. He would have liked to be able to step back to their uncomplicated friendship of a few months earlier, too, when he hadn’t made as many stupid mistakes as he had.

But Draco wasn’t about to let Harry find the road back. He had changed. So had Harry. Draco had known that the first time Harry shied from his touch, if not earlier. And if he let Harry get away with this, then the prat would just find some way to smother his pain from the dreams, or maybe make Draco’s shields thicker so that he couldn’t sense them.

And the maddening thing was, he would do it for unselfish reasons; those were his real ones. Draco didn’t care, though. It was still maddening.

“All right,” said Harry at last, and let his head fall back on the pillow with a sigh. “Merlin, you don’t give up, do you?”

“Never,” said Draco, and felt able to give a smug smile at Harry, which was returned with interest as a frown. “Really, Harry, if you would just look at that serpent I gave you once in a while, then you’d—”

He shut up as he heard a soft hissing sound travel through the dungeons. He flinched. He’d only heard that sound once before, but he knew what it portended. It wasn’t easy to forget.

“Oh, no,” he muttered.
“Draco?” Harry was sitting upright in a moment, looking around as though to move between him and danger. “What is it?”

“My mother’s decided on the response she’s going to make for my summoning Julia against her will,” said Draco hollowly. The hissing sound was right next to the bed now, and even knowing it would only hurt for a moment, he winced and cowered. Harry had been the one to insist that Draco write a letter to Narcissa telling her the truth, but he had thought the only possible retaliation would be a Howler. Draco knew better. “She’s done it before.”

“When?” Harry asked, even as the curtains parted and a silvery shape slithered its way across the bed to Draco. Harry was handing his wand with barely a twitch of his hand, and then he hissed, as though he thought he could speak to the snake and distract it from its duty. Draco shook his head at him.

“When I tried to practice a Blasting Curse on one of our house elves,” said Draco, wincing just at the memory, “and wound up destroying one of my mother’s family heirlooms instead.” He held out his hand, palm flat. The snake wrapped around his wrist. It was much bigger than the tiny serpent that had attacked him last year, but just as artificial, made of gleaming metal. It did not stop hissing as it fixed glittering green eyes on Draco’s face, but its jaws parted, and Narcissa’s voice came out.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy,” she said.

Draco looked down.

“I am very disappointed in you.”

That was what she had said about the chest he’d destroyed, too. Draco had to force himself not to curl his hand up. The snake would only pry it flat and administer the bite anyway, as it had last time. It would hurt less this way.

“Disappointed enough to use the heir-snake,” Narcissa continued. “What you did was unworthy of your name, unworthy of the pride that we raised you to have. To go begging to the dead, Draco. I had thought you were long past such childish courses, that you would never have considered them.

“And you broke your promise to me. You are not an adult, as long as you do so. You are a child.”

Draco swallowed.

“Heir-snake?” Harry nudged him with one elbow.

“Explain in a minute,” Draco muttered. “I don’t know if she’s done yet.”

Narcissa, as it happened, was not done. “Your father has said that he will congratulate you on becoming a magical heir to the Malfoy line, but only when you have shown him that you can be an adult. Until then, you need a reminder of what you have been and must grow away from.”

The snake whipped its head around and bit straight into the center of his palm. Draco sucked in his breath, but did not cry aloud. The serpent would be able to hear that, and would carry the sound back to his parents.

The snake slithered gracefully off his arm a moment later, and off the bed. It would make its way back to Malfoy Manor and freeze into motionlessness once more, until Narcissa again had cause to punish him.

Draco watched in dread as the bite in the center of his palm colored quickly, and then transformed into an image of himself as a two-year-old, wiping its eyes and crying. It didn’t make any sound, luckily, being no worse than a magical photograph, but anyone who looked at it could see his face going blotchy and his mouth gaping in the moans of a spoiled child. Draco started to fold his hand shut.

“Let me see.”

Harry gripped his wrist and gently turned his hand over, frowning at the image. “Do you want me to heal it?” he asked.

Draco found himself smiling, though he knew it was a shaky expression. “No. The heir-snake would just return and bite me again.”
“What was that all about?” Harry went on lightly holding Draco’s hand, not seeming to realize he was doing it—or perhaps he had realized, and was willingly reaching out for contact. Since Halloween, Harry had seemed reluctant to endure any touch that he didn’t initiate. Draco flexed his fingers, partially to enjoy this while he had it and partially to ease the pain of the bite, and explained.

“It’s an heirloom that Malfoy mothers, or the women who marry into the Malfoy line, inherit. It’s used to punish children who really should know better. It reminds them of what they were when they break a promise or do something else younger than their age.” He peered at the crying image in his palm, and found it, if possible, more horrid than before. He gave Harry a sickly smile. “I knew she’d probably do that. I broke my promise to her. I haven’t done that in years, and never in a way that could have endangered my life before.”

Harry snorted. “I’m glad to see that you realized that much, at least. Go back to sleep, Draco. It’s Saturday. We don’t have to be awake for a while yet.”

Draco nodded, but waited until Harry pulled away from him and lay down again before he climbed back into his own bed. Even then, he hesitated to murmur, “No more nightmares without telling me, Harry, remember?”

Silence, and then Harry sighed and said, “No more nightmares. Good morning, Draco.”

Draco slid back into his bed satisfied, despite the lingering pain in his hand. He knew he was being an annoyance, but that was the only way to keep Harry from retreating into his shell, and so far, it had worked.

Besides, he knew his mother wasn’t furious with him. If she were, she would have sent him the heir-snake with instructions for it to bite him in public.

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“We wish you would let us bite him.”

Harry rolled his eyes as he and Draco entered the Great Hall for breakfast. The comment from the Many had become the usual order of things, and he no longer knew why. Draco hadn’t done anything especially annoying in the last week; in fact, he’d been much better than he was before, now that the compulsion on his mind and heart had finally cracked. “No,” he said, just as he always said, and sat down at the Slytherin table.

The Many hissed in irritation, but the smell of food distracted the little snake, and soon it had crawled up his wrist and was daintily eating the bits of food he deigned to feed it. Harry glanced around the room halfway through breakfast, noticing with a faint curiosity that most of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students were there. Of course, it was Saturday, but even last weekend, most of them hadn’t eaten at the same time.

Really? Are you sure? You had other things to notice last weekend.

Harry winced at nothing and shook his head. He was—well, compromising on the issue of Vera’s words. He kept them hovering beneath the surface of his mind, and peeked at them when he absolutely couldn’t stand it any longer. Otherwise, though, he ignored them as much as possible. She had said many hurtful things, things that could prevent him from helping others if he spent too much time thinking about them. So he wouldn’t.

He caught Connor’s eye from where he sat at the Gryffindor table, and smiled slightly. His brother was yawning, one hand pressed in front of his mouth and his nose wrinkled. He straightened up the moment he caught sight of Harry, though, as if he wanted to prove that he was too adult to yawn. Harry lifted his forkful of sausage to him in greeting, and Connor nodded back.

“Attention, students.”

Harry jumped slightly. Dumbledore hadn’t been behind the head table a moment ago, but he was there now, and most of the other professors were with him—minus Snape, which made Harry close his eyes for a moment. Dumbledore, of course, was smiling, and he held out one hand in front of him as though to give a blessing.

“As you know,” Dumbledore continued ceremoniously, “we have left the Goblet of Fire alone for a week—long enough for
worthy students of all schools to enter their names in a bid to compete in the Triwizard Tournament.”

*Oh, yes, that nonsense.* Harry had known that a few upper-level Slytherins entered their names, but most of his yearmates seemed to be above that. The one thing he felt grateful for was that he knew Draco hadn’t done it, since he’d been so occupied, first with the potion and then wrestling with the consequences of the gift of empathy.

“Ow,” Draco said beside him, as if sensing his thoughts.

“Who is it this time?” Harry muttered at him from the side of his mouth, not taking his eyes off Dumbledore.

“Blaise again.” Draco whispered the name. Blaise was just two seats down from Harry, on the other side of Millicent. “Droopy. Weepy. A brewing black thunderstorm of melancholy.” He paused. “Come on, Harry, let me make fun of him.”

“You’d have to explain how you knew,” said Harry, and sipped at his porridge.

“I would not. I’m a Slytherin. He’d just assume that I figured out he was mooning over somebody from keen observation.”

“Maybe he had bad news from home,” said Harry, shaking his head. Granted, he wasn’t the empath, but he didn’t see how Draco could be sure that Blaise’s romantic sorrow was, well, romantic, and not the result of some tragedy. “And I think you need to work on your shielding.”

“Hush it, Potter,” Pansy snapped, leaning around Draco’s shoulder and frowning at him. “They’re about to announce whose names will come out of the Goblet to compete in the Tournament.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Pansy’s face was flushed, her eyes brighter than they appeared to be normally.

“Tell me you didn’t put your name in the Goblet,” he said.

Pansy flushed more deeply and turned her back on him to face Dumbledore.

Harry rolled his eyes. *Merlin, what does she want? It’s not like her family needs the money. The attention? Honestly, who would?*

“The Goblet of Fire creates a binding magical contract on the wizards and witches whose names emerge,” Dumbledore was saying. “That means that, if someone’s name comes out of the Goblet, that person *must* compete in the Tournament.” He paused, but he’d done too good a job promoting this Tournament as something exciting and not dangerous, Harry thought. Most of the students still watched eagerly as Dumbledore tapped a large chest in front of him three times with his wand and took out a rough wooden goblet.

The top was burning with blue flame, and Harry, his eyes squinting against the sudden blaze of magic that the Goblet had brought into the room, had to admit that that more than made up for its appearance. Dumbledore held out his hand, and a scrap of parchment emerged from the flames and settled into his palm.

“The champion for Durmstrang,” he read out, his voice loud and confident, “is Viktor Krum.”

The Durmstrang students broke into cheers, and Harry blinked as the Quidditch player he remembered from the World Cup stood and shouldered his way forward to the head table. Dumbledore spoke with him softly for a moment, and Krum nodded and walked through a door into a small side room leading off the Hall.

Once again, the Goblet gave a name into Dumbledore’s hand, and this time he smiled, as though he’d had something personally to do with the selection. “The champion for Beauxbatons,” he said, “is Fleur Delacour.”

Harry saw one of the part-Veela girls rise in a cloud of shimmering silver hair. Subdued, butterfly-like applause trailed her as she walked up to the head table. Harry caught a glimpse of her face, and was reminded of Narcissa the first time he had met her. Fleur, though, had let a hint of nervous excitement color her cheeks. Dumbledore spoke with her slightly longer than he had with Krum before sending her into the small side room.

Harry noticed most of the students around him leaning forward. Draco was rubbing his forehead and murmuring something about “bloody excitement headache.”
“He hasn’t announced the Hogwarts champion yet,” Pansy murmured. “I still have a chance.”

“For Merlin’s sake,” said Harry, but a glance at their faces showed that no one was paying attention to him. He shook his head and finished his porridge, as the Goblet seemed to deliberate on the final name before shooting another scrap of parchment into Dumbledore’s hand.

“And the champion for Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said, “is Connor Potter.”

Harry felt himself gasp, which caused him to choke on his porridge. He heard cries of interest, cries of outrage, and at least one foot-stomping fit of disappointment from Pansy. Beside him, Millicent had gone silent and intent, and Draco stared across the room at Connor.

“But he didn’t put his name in the Goblet, I thought,” he said.

Harry gained control of his choking, and swiveled his head to look at his brother, his heart going crazy in his chest. Connor’s face was pale. He stared at the Headmaster with a look that did not seem to crave either fame or fortune. That look said that he didn’t know what the hell was going on.

“Come forward, now, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore was saying. “When one’s name emerges from the Goblet of Fire, one is bound to compete in the Triwizard Tournament.”

One look at Dumbledore’s face, which was still smiling serenely, and not at all concerned that he was putting the Boy-Who-Lived in the way of danger, convinced Harry that Dumbledore had planned this.

_The bloody bastard._

Even as his twin hesitantly stood and made his way up to the head table, Harry was letting his magic go. Dumbledore looked abruptly in Harry’s direction just before Connor reached him. Harry narrowed his eyes and inclined his head. Beneath his hand, the remnants of the porridge in his bowl had turned to ice.

_We need to talk, Dumbledore._

As though he’d heard the words in Harry’s thoughts, Dumbledore nodded, and spoke kindly with Connor for a moment, ignoring the way that Harry’s twin desperately shook his head. A few moments later, Connor put his head down and trooped unhappily into the side room.

“I will converse with our champions for a few moments, and tell them what to expect,” Dumbledore announced to the room, as the Goblet of Fire’s flames went out, and he tucked it back into the chest in front of him. “After that, I will be in my office in case anyone wishes to speak with me.” His gaze lingered on Harry for a moment, and then he turned and swept out of the Hall.

Harry glared after him, and then Draco was tugging on his arm and muttering, “Come on, Harry, calm down. You’re giving me a headache here.”

Harry blinked, startled out of his rage. “I thought my magic didn’t give you a headache any more,” he said, glancing at his friend.

“Not your magic, your fury,” said Draco plainly. “Come on. There’s nothing you can do about it for right now. I’ll walk you to the Headmaster’s office.” He tugged on Harry’s arm again.

Harry nodded, and stood. He did think it was funny, as they left amid the buzz of curiosity and interest and unease from other students in the Hall, that the one person whose expression seemed to match his was Moody’s. He had just destroyed his goblet with what looked like a modified Blasting Curse, as though intensely upset that Connor’s name had come out of the Goblet.

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Harry tensed when he saw Dumbledore coming up the corridor towards them. Draco, who’d been standing beside him but
saying nothing, tensed too, and laid his unmarked hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Just be calm,” he whispered.

Harry could not be calm, though. His gaze was fixed on the Headmaster, and he couldn’t seem to remove it. Rage had given way to something more dangerous, a mixture of glazed ice and dark, shifting water that altered from moment to moment. Distrust and disgust were the foremost emotions in it, but they were mixed with others, among them the abiding conviction that he would not forgive Dumbledore this mistake.

“Ah, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I think that you should go and comfort your brother after this interview. He did seem somewhat upset about having to compete in the Tournament, though he understands, now, that there’s no way that he can back out.” He smiled at Harry.

Bloody bastard. He isn’t even pretending that he had nothing to do with it! I just—I don’t understand—

“Why?” Harry whispered, and knew his voice was shaking.

“Because,” said Dumbledore gently, “Connor needs a test of his own, an arena in which he can shine. He has become less noticed this year than he ever was. At least, when he was in the storm of crisis that his accusations against you last year and the year before created, he was learning how to weather the fame and the expectations that came with being the Boy-Who-Lived. But now, Harry, whose name is in the newspapers? Who in your family is the focus of attention?”

Harry couldn’t quite mask a wince. His oldest instincts shrieked that this was wrong, that he shouldn’t be taking time and attention away from Connor. His training in defensive magic had been quite heavy on spells that would protect his brother without attracting notice by their flashiness. And now he’d been flashy and not even realized it.

He took a deep breath. He bore the guilt, he knew he did. He would deal with it later, though. He needed to say this. “His life is in danger in the Tournament. He could be killed.”

“He has at least as much a chance as the other champions, I would say,” Dumbledore murmured. “And more than most. Why wouldn’t he? He is the Boy-Who-Lived, and most people accept that he must be a wondrously powerful wizard, to have defeated Voldemort.”

Harry opened his mouth to answer, and found himself stymied again. If he claimed he was more powerful than Connor, then he was saying the kind of thing his training made him intensely uncomfortable with saying. And if he said Connor was more powerful, it was a blatant lie.

He found himself hissing at Dumbledore, and the Many hissed back comfortingly from his arm.

“We may bite this one, at least?”

“No,” Harry insisted, and then turned back to the Headmaster instead of listening to the Many having a sulk. “I don’t understand why you would do this,” he bit out. “You must know that your favored interpretation of the prophecy is in danger if he is.”

“I trust that you will protect him, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Thanks to his brother, he has survived worse dangers.”

Harry closed his eyes. “You’re trying to tangle me up again,” he said. “Keep me busy.”

“Yes, he is,” Draco breathed against the back of his neck, so softly that Harry almost could not hear him. “His emotions are saying so. He was a bit surprised that you figured it out.”

Harry opened his eyes quickly, but if Dumbledore had ever actually looked surprised, it was gone now. “The Goblet has chosen,” he said. “The Tournament must proceed. Connor will succeed, Harry. You’ll see. And this will give him a chance to step, at last, out of his brother’s long shadow.”

Harry came very close to hating Dumbledore then. He watched in silent rage as the Headmaster whispered the password to the gargoyle and it sprang aside. Dumbledore put one foot on the staircase beyond, and then paused.
“Oh, I had almost forgotten,” he said, and drew an envelope from his pocket. “This came for you this morning, Harry. It’s the letter I want you to answer.” He tossed it to Harry, who caught it automatically.

“Why should I?” Harry had to ask, since his magic was trembling, as eager as the Many, to be let out and attack Dumbledore. “Why should I, when you’ve broken our truce by dragging Connor into this damn Tournament?”

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. “Why, Harry,” he said, “this letter has nothing to do with our earlier truce. It is the culmination of a promise you made me for quite a different reason, don’t you remember?”

Harry did. The Minister gone, and Snape free. If Dumbledore voted to keep Fudge in office and to send Snape to prison, then Harry was fairly certain the rest of the Wizengamot would follow him.

*If they knew...*

But if they were to have proof of what Dumbledore had done, then they would need to know how *Harry* knew these things, and they would have to dig up the whole sorry story, and that would hurt other people and bring attention to focus on some aspects of his life that Harry could not bear to have exposed.

“I hate you,” he whispered to Dumbledore, and slipped the letter into the pocket of his robes, and went to find Connor, Draco hot on his heels.

******

Albus watched Harry go with a slight frown. The boy had reacted more violently than he had hoped or expected to the inclusion of his brother in the Triwizard Tournament.

*I thought he would understand,* he mused as he climbed the stairs to his office. *He is the one who wished to play in politics. He was the one who went to Slytherin. He should be well used to the necessity of testing someone. And since Connor did not actually defeat Tom either when he was a baby or last year, and I highly suspect that he did not in the Chamber, either, he must grow stronger. There must be a reckoning. At least this will not be the fatal kind. And Harry should have known that I would use those words against him.*

*Harry needs to learn love and forgiveness, I know that. But sometimes he acts as if he had too much compassion already. I do not understand it.*

*Ah, well. This is his brother. We trained him long enough, Lily and I, to love Connor to the exclusion of all else.* Albus nodded, accepting that his foresight had failed because he had forgotten the bond between the twins. *I should have known he would snap at me like this.*

But Harry would keep his promise, or he would have destroyed the letter with fire already. He would read it. He would reply. And that meant he would be taking the first step on a long, long road to becoming the kind of leader they would *truly* need, since he had told Albus the possibility of his fulfilling a different role in the prophecy.

*Harry will understand, when he reads what she has written.*

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Harry didn’t even need to wait before entering Gryffindor Tower. Ron was watching for him, and let him in, with only the faintest glare of distaste at Draco.

“Where is he?” Harry asked, looking around the common room and finding no Connor there.

“Upstairs.” Ron gestured with his head. “He’s locked the door and won’t let anyone else talk to him. It’s pretty bad, mate.”

Harry nodded and turned to the stairs.

“Harry?”

Harry glanced back at Ron, and found him frowning, biting one knuckle. Ron waited. Harry waited.
Ron broke first, and said, “Are you sure that he didn’t put his name in the Goblet? He says he didn’t, but…” He shrugged, as though to say that he would not have given up the opportunity to pursue such fame and fortune himself, danger or no danger.

Harry quelled the temptation to snap. Ron was Ron, and he wanted to distinguish himself. With his family and the block on his magic, which Harry had sensed was still there all through the lessons in spells that he had given him, it made sense. And if he thought Connor had been lying to him, he would be understandably upset.

“I’m sure,” said Harry quietly. “He’s been occupied with something else, an argument he’s been having with our dad by letter.”

Ron’s face clouded, even as he nodded. “I know what that’s like,” he said darkly. “Percy’s still a git, and won’t come work with our dad.”

Harry hesitated, but Percy’s secret wasn’t his to tell. He just inclined his head and went up the stairs. Draco laid a hand on his shoulder all the way up, and Harry forced himself not to throw it off. It didn’t feel bad, really, just tempting, and he couldn’t afford to give in to temptation right now.

He knocked on the door to the fourth-year boys’ room, and received an angry shout from behind it.

“I told you I didn’t want to talk to anyone!”

“Too bad,” Harry muttered, and undid the locking charms that Connor had put on the door with a few twitches of his will. He stepped in, and had to duck the pillow that Connor threw at him. It caught Draco full in the face, though.

“Merlin, Potter,” Draco said, wiping dust off his cheeks. “Do you chase the house elves away from your bed just so that you can have the pleasure of lying around in your own filth?”

Connor’s face flushed. He’d already been crying, and now he started scrabbling for his wand among the bedcovers.

“So help me, Draco,” Harry said in an undertone, “talk to him again, and I’ll hurt you.” He stepped forward before Draco could say anything to that, and grasped his brother’s wrist. Connor tried to jerk away.

Harry wouldn’t let him, turning him around and wrapping him in an embrace instead. Connor closed his eyes tightly and held onto him with strength that Harry recognized as desperate. That didn’t bother him. In fact, he could feel himself truly relaxing for the first time in a week. This, he didn’t have to do research on, the way that he did with the Parseltongue book that Arabella had sent him, or on house elf webs. This, he could do something about immediately, and help someone else. That was the only thing that truly made him feel at ease.

“It’s all right, Connor,” he breathed into his brother’s hair. “I’ll help you. I’ll help you find spells to survive the Tasks, whatever they are. I know that you didn’t put your name in the Goblet, and I know that you didn’t want fame and glory.” And his brother didn’t, he was convinced. Connor had been too busy trying to put himself together again after Sirius’s death to crave this kind of thing. “I won’t let you die.”

Connor gripped his shoulders for a moment. “You don’t think I’m cowardly, to be afraid?” he whispered.

“You didn’t want this,” said Harry. “How is that cowardly?”

“I got a lecture,” Connor muttered, pulling away enough to wipe at his face. “From some of the upper years, especially this fellow named McLaggen. I should show courage, what was I crying for, I was going to make the other Houses think Gryffindor was wet, and so on.”

Harry sighed. “Well, they will expect you to show up for events with the other champions, and smile and look cheerful about it,” he said. Connor’s hazel eyes were clearer now, and he did seem more relaxed, both of which made Harry feel more cheerful. “But you can do that, right? I mean, you did it first year when you got chosen for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and that was unusual.”

“But now I don’t feel like it,” said Connor. “Sometimes I get tired of being the Boy-Who-Lived all the bloody time.”
Harry felt Draco shift, as though he were going to say something, but he thankfully didn’t and make Harry have to hurt him.

Harry smiled gently at his brother and brushed the hair back from his heart-shaped scar.

“Keep quiet,” he whispered. “And you’ll always have me to talk to, me to lean on, if it gets to be too much. I mean it, Connor. I love you, and I’ll be here for you.”

Connor’s eyes cleared completely, and he nodded, slowly, as though he needed to feel each separate part of the motion. “That’s what I keep telling Dad,” he said. “That’s what we’re arguing about. I keep telling him that he’s being an idiot for not trusting you to know your own mind and backing off Snape. He keeps writing back—oh, all kinds of things, that Snape has corrupted you and you should have more loyalty to your blood family and so on.” Connor shrugged, his face growing mulish, but, thankfully, no longer closed, the way it had been before when Harry tried to talk to him about James. “He’s an idiot. I wish he was here so he’d eat his words. But don’t worry. I’ll tell him about this, unless you would rather I’d not.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. “No, it’s fine. Thank you, Connor.” He hugged his brother on the shoulders this time, and pulled away with a pat on his back. “And you’ll come to me if you need my help, right?”

Connor nodded. “I promise.”

“Good.” Harry turned around again, and saw Draco watching them both with an odd expression on his face. Harry blinked and peered at him. It looked like jealousy. Harry shook his head. Surely Draco had to know that if he were in the same kind of trouble, Harry would help him the same way? And he was an empath now, and should be able to feel Connor’s sincere pain and agony.

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do,” he told Connor, and, on receiving a smile from his twin, left in contentment —

Or as much contentment as he could find, with the letter burning a hole in his pocket.

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Harry took a deep breath and slowly opened the envelope. He had a suspicion as to who it would be from. That was the reason he’d, according to Draco, “been radiating anxiety that would drown the Giant Squid,” and the reason that he’d gently refused company while he read the letter. Draco had finally, reluctantly, backed off, and let Harry come to the Owlery alone to read it.

There, amid the gentle shiftings and shufflings of the birds, with the honesty-charmed parchment he’d borrowed from Dumbledore earlier in the week beside him, Harry looked down and read the letter he’d known, in the back of his mind, would be coming.

Dear son:

I imagine that you never expected to hear from me again. What else could there be to say between us? You made your feelings clear when you took away my magic. And you probably thought I had made mine clear with the betrayal I inflicted upon you.

No, you have not been blinded, or charmed. The only charm on this parchment insures my complete honesty. It was a betrayal, and I can see it now, in that light. I have had much time to think, Harry—nearly a year.

For months afterward, yes, I raged and plotted as to how to get you back under my control. That was the reason I told Connor to compel you if nothing else would answer. But around May, I got past that. The news of Sirius’s death and how you had saved your brother yet again, which Albus told me of, helped open my eyes to the fact that pain other than my own existed in the world.

Albus also told me of your changed position in regards to the prophecy.

Harry, I cannot say that I regret everything I did in the past, because this parchment is forcing me to be honest. I can say that I would do it all differently now. I did not realize the truth about what happened the night of the attack. If I had, then I would have helped you train your magic so that you could fight Voldemort, not bound it and caged it. I would have helped you become the Boy-Who-Lived, not the guardian of the one I thought was the Boy-Who-Lived. I would have helped you
accept your possible death in the light of being a hero, rather than being a sacrifice.

As it is, I accept that I cannot have my magic back. I would like to know my sons again—the young men Albus says they have become in the wake of May’s events. I read of you only in the newspapers now, and a terror and a thrill touches me, that the sons I raised have become so formidable.

Harry, will you let me greet you on a new footing, one where I know what you are and what you can do? Will you consent to see me again? The justice ritual prevents us from meeting because you said that you did not want to see me again, but that part can be reversed, even though the loss of my magic cannot be. This distance between us was something you required, not a reparation from me, and a prohibition that has affected you as much as me. If you change your mind, we can see each other once more.

Please write back.

Love,
Lily.

Harry closed his eyes. He sat in silence for a long time, save for the brush of wings above him as owls came and went.

Then he drew out the honesty-charmed parchment—how glad he was, right now, that he didn’t have to go to Dumbledore’s office and borrow some—and composed his reply, intensely glad that no one was there to see him, and the way his hand shook.

This is for Snape, he told himself, again and again.

It was the only way he got through the letter.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: The Hardest Letter He Ever Wrote

Lily:

I don’t know where to begin. I don’t know if I should write a true response to the letter you sent, or simply record my emotions about you as they flow forth from my quill. At least the parchment insures that these words will be honest.

And yes, I did check the parchment for charms and curses before I used it.

I suppose I can begin with the notion of sacrifice. There are times I hate what you made me. Someone very wise said—things to me recently that make a lot of sense, as much as I hate to admit it. I don’t like thinking about them, but one of them was that I consider everyone else worthy of love and forgiveness, but myself. And I suppose that’s true. And if that’s a result of your training, then—

But no, I can’t write that, because I don’t believe it. I suppose this parchment works after all.

I think it may be a result of your training, but I’ve become someone who does put other people before myself. I can admit that much. And that is a good thing. It must be. How can it not be? You trained me to be a weapon, a sacrifice, the guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived, and I think if you had stopped there, it would have been enough, and I would have been what you wished me to be. But you also put on the phoenix web, and that meant I broke free and turned my attention elsewhere, because I felt unduly constrained. So I feel the same way about most of the wizards around me that I used to feel about Connor. And the magical creatures, too.

I am what you made me, always.

Is that evil?

My skills are what have won me allies. My knowledge of the pureblood dances gave me ways to approach those allies. My defensive magic helped save Connor’s and Draco’s lives in first year, and then other people in the years after that. Being left wide open to Voldemort gave me the magic that made you fear me and introduce the phoenix web, and that means that I
broke free, and that means that I turned my attention to other people.

I already wrote that.

Perhaps this parchment brings forth ideas that are very strong more than once? I know already that it forces me to write what I honestly believe. I can write something I am sure is true, and something I’m not sure is true—I tried on other pieces of it—but I can’t write something I’m sure is false.

All right, then. Here it is.

I find myself unsure if I forgive you. And then I think about my allies.

Lucius Malfoy tortured three Muggleborn children to death, because they were born possessing magic, and weren’t of a pureblood line. That’s all. That’s the only crime they committed. And I have never upbraided him for it. In fact, I’ve progressed very far with him in a truce-dance, almost to the final step.

Hawthorn Parkinson was a mistress of blood curses, and cursed Jacob Smith with a blood-letting spell that replenished his blood even as it cut new wounds and opened them again and again, wounds that should have killed him in a few hours. He bled to death for days, screaming as he did so, and the healers in St. Mungo’s could do nothing for him. He lived for three weeks before he died. Hawthorn has never said that she regrets that. And I’ve brewed a potion that she needs for her since last year, and I made a formal alliance with her not long after I met her.

Adalrico Bulstrode was suspected of helping Voldemort design the Black Plague curse. How many lives did that claim? How many Aurors did it raze? How many children died choking to death on the spores? Adalrico has never mentioned that at all. And I’ve also made formal alliance with him, and sit calmly enough beside his daughter at the Slytherin table.

They did far worse than you have. They hurt other people, which is what I have said I cannot stand. And yet I let the memory of the justice they more than likely deserve lapse. I have told myself that one cannot win justice for the dead, and that it was in the War, when all sides did horrible things, and that I am supposed to have compassion, and shouldn’t I forgive them?

Then, if I forgive them, how can I not forgive you? You left Connor exposed to the Dark Lord, and lied to him, and did not train him as you should have, if he was really to be the Boy-Who-Lived. But that is of a piece with their crimes, and with Dumbledore’s.

And Lucius loves his son, and Hawthorn has looked at me with kind eyes, and Adalrico has celebrated with me.

And you did what you did in the name of war, in the name of saving the world.

Nothing is ever simple. You taught me to see that at a young age. I thank you for that. I do not think it is a lesson that either Dumbledore or Voldemort ever truly learned.

How can those two kinds of things exist in the same person? But they do. And I will not betray all that I am, all that you made me, by saying that Lucius Malfoy’s love for his son is false, or that all your decisions must have been wrong and made in the knowledge that you were doing wrong, simply because I am uncomfortable with one truth or the other.

I do not know if I can forgive you yet, especially since I was not the only one you hurt, and there is the betrayal that you inflicted on me by trying to renew the phoenix web. But if we are speaking only of the crimes against me…

You made me what I am.

You may have saved the world in doing so.

You made me someone who can gain allies in doing so.

And all the time, I know that perhaps I am only forgiving you because you have raised me to forgive all crimes against myself. I know what the source of this feeling is, but that does not stop it. And thus I embody contradictions of my own.

My feelings regarding you will never be simple, and anyone who thinks they are is a fool, including me, if I ever thought it.
I cannot see you yet. I still can’t do that. And part of me says that that’s fine and only fair, and part of me says that that’s weakness, but the parchment only compels me to write what’s true, not what’s right.

I can think about the things this wise person said to me, but I can’t believe all of them. Not yet. And some I know are false, or a consequence of her not understanding everything that she saw.

I’ve missed you. I’ve hated you. I’ve mourned for you. I’ve called you Muggle in my thoughts, and Mum to please Connor. Nothing is ever simple.

Nothing ever should be.

Regards,
Harry.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty: Decus

Harry let out a long, shivering breath, and closed his eyes.

I will not destroy half of Hogwarts, I will not destroy half of Hogwarts...

He stood there until his shaking and his magic ebbed. He finally had to resort to tucking some of his rage behind Occlumency shields, but it worked. He opened his eyes and breathed deeply.

He gave Dumbledore’s gargoyle one last look, and could have sworn it cowered. Then he set off back to the dungeons, hoping no one would accost him. His strides were long and angry, but his magic was only surging around him like a brushfire part of the time. That meant someone might try to talk.

And Harry was really, really in no mood for any conversation not conducted at a shout.

He’d confronted Dumbledore just a few minutes ago, trying to claim that the terms of the truce they’d sworn meant Dumbledore could not have put Connor in the Tournament and kept his agreement with Harry, so he should withdraw him at once. And Dumbledore had had the nerve to smile at him, and say, “Why, Harry, do you not remember that you also agreed to train Connor? This is part of that. I am not endangering him. Not with you here. I know that you would prevent any permanent harm from coming to him.”

And since Dumbledore believed that, and Harry knew he would die before he let one of the Tasks destroy his brother, and nothing in the truce said that Harry could not risk his own life—freely and willingly—there the matter lay. Under the terms of the truce, this was not a threat, because it was not something Harry could not protect Connor from, and it fulfilled one of the conditions that Harry himself had offered in exchange for Dumbledore’s help.

On a technicality, it does, Harry thought, aiming a savage kick at the wall, and then wincing when he saw the patch of stone he’d aimed his foot for frost over. But then, the bloody bastard thrives on technicalities—technicalities of consent and webs and laws and Light magic.

He ran a hand through his hair. He knew that part of the reason he was upset came from his mother’s letter, and part of the reason from his nightmares, which refused to leave him alone whenever he slept, and another part from the newly added stress of helping Connor to train for the Tournament. None of that meant he had any excuse to go around kicking walls.

Hush. Hush. Be at peace. Relax. You have to meet Connor in the library in an hour to talk with him about what the First Task might be. He said he might have some clues from listening to the older students talk.

And he couldn’t shout then.

What he really wanted, Harry had to admit as he growled the password to the door of the Slytherin common room, barely waiting until it opened, was someone to shout at, someone who fully deserved it and wouldn’t just smile and deflect him with talk of legal technicalities like Dumbledore.
He climbed the stairs to the fourth-year boys’ room, only grunting when Millicent called up to him.

“Harry. I mean it.”

Harry blinked and turned his head to regard her. He hadn’t been aware that she’d said anything more than his name. “What?”

Millicent tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at him. “Some more food at dinner tonight, I think,” she said. “You still haven’t been eating enough. You haven’t since the announcement of the Tournament.”

“That’s because it’s rather hard to force things down past clenched teeth and a throat filled with bile.”

Millicent shrugged at him. “Whatever, Potter. You’ll eat tonight. And I meant what I said. That bedroom has sounded like a war zone for the last ten minutes. On your head be it if you go in there. I’m not nursing you back to health if you get caught in an Unforgivable.” She turned back to a thick book that Harry recognized as her History of Magic text.

Harry looked up the stairs. Now that he was listening, Millicent was right: He could hear crashing sounds, quickly muffled spells, and what sounded like thumps and yelps coming from their room.

He almost snarled with anticipation as he sped up the stairs and opened the door. **Perfect.**

He was just in time to see Draco duck a hex from Blaise’s wand, pop up again, and croon, “Oh, does Blaise-Waisy love someone from Gryffindor? That would explain the little lions you’ve been drawing on your homework.”

“I do not draw lions on my homework, you insufferable prat!” Blaise was more flustered than Harry had ever seen him; the very fact that he’d drawn his wand testified to that. He flung a Jelly-Legs Jinx, which Draco also rolled under. He was moving close to the table beside his bed, Harry saw, and in a moment he had his wand in his hand and could scramble up to face Blaise on equal footing. Neither one of them had even noticed Harry come in, seemingly.

“You do so,” said Draco, who was beaming and smug in the way that only certain knowledge made him. He’s used his knowledge of Blaise’s emotions, Harry realized. He really was brooding over a crush. “Or, wait, perhaps not. Perhaps I mistook the little hearts for them.”

Blaise let out a shriek that ended with, “Abicio!” Draco cast a Shield Charm in front of him to take the edge off the Flinging Hex, and looked proud as Blaise’s spell dissipated into nothingness.

“Shut your bloody mouth, Malfoy,” Blaise said next, his voice deepening. Harry studied his face, and saw his mother there, one of the few times he ever had. Blaise was dangerously angry, and it really was about time to intervene. “It’s none of your bloody business who I crush on.”

“But you do admit to crushing on someone!” Draco performed an impromptu little dance. Harry was Draco’s friend, he really was, but just about then, he understood why Ron might want to strangle him.

“At least I admit it,” Blaise spat. “That’s more than you do, huh, Draco? Not that you could admit it. You’ll probably pine yourself to death before you do something about it, because you’re afraid, aren’t you? You don’t realize that you——”

“Petrificus Totalus——” Draco began, a look of transcendent rage on his face.

“Expellarmus!” Harry cut in, shaking his head at himself for waiting so long to intervene. He caught both wands as they soared towards him, and raised his eyebrows when Draco and Blaise spun around as one to scowl at him. “That will be quite enough from both of you,” he said. He gave Draco a warning glare as he opened his mouth. “Now. Why don’t you apologize to each other? Then I’ll return your wands.” He had to admit that he was hoping they wouldn’t apologize. He wanted to yell at someone.

“I won’t,” said Draco predictably. “Merlin, Harry, did you hear him? He was mocking me!”

Harry narrowed his eyes as his anger chose a target. “Draco,” he said. “You have an unfair advantage.” Can I not leave him alone for an hour without him starting to poke people? He should know better than to use his empathy like that. Draco was much better than he had been the last few months, Harry had to admit, but he was far from perfect, and this fight showed how far.
“I don’t care!” said Draco. “He mocked me.” He waited and looked at Harry, and after a moment, Harry realized he was waiting for a sign that his suffering was shared, that his best friend was on his side.

Harry wasn’t, not this time. He shook his head at Draco, and then turned to Blaise. “Look, I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re right. It’s none of our business who you crush on.” He tossed Blaise’s wand back. “Just don’t curse him, all right? He’ll be impossible to live with if you do.”

Blaise gave Harry a hard glance, but nodded and slipped his wand into his robe pocket. “Always the peacemaker, aren’t you, Potter?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “Not always. Draco and I are about to have a little chat that should prove quite spirited.” Especially, Harry noted, looking at Draco out of the corner of his eye, since he shows no sign of admitting he was wrong. “Do you mind leaving, Blaise?”

Blaise shook his head. “It beats me how you put up with him,” he muttered, as he grabbed his Defense Against the Dark Arts homework and took his leave. “Or how you’re ever going to put up with him later.”

Harry blinked, wondering what that meant, then let it slide with another shrug. He tipped the door shut behind Blaise with his foot, then faced Draco.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Draco said immediately, before Harry could start. “He was lying there sighing, and I could feel all his bloody emotions! What else was I supposed to do?”

“Not pick at him?” Harry suggested between clenched teeth.

“He wouldn’t stop,” said Draco, and sulked at him.

“I don’t care,” said Harry. “You promised me that you would work on this, Draco, that you’d try to learn how to use your empathy, and not just take advantage of how it allows you to view other people’s emotions. What possessed you? You’ve been doing—rather well so far.” He had been. No, it wasn’t perfect, but he’d managed to resist picking on Blaise for almost two weeks.

Draco muttered something Harry couldn’t make out.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Louder, Draco. I don’t think the ghosts of Malfoys past would like their descendant to mumble.”

That pointed reference to Julia brought Draco’s eyes, and his temper, up. “I said that I was lonely,” he said harshly. “And tired. And that my forehead hurt. Your scar’s bleeding even when you’re awake now, isn’t it?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. No, he isn’t going to do this to me, not tip the ground from beneath my feet. “Yes, as a matter of fact, it has been,” he said coolly. “That doesn’t mean that you need to—”

“When were you planning to tell me this?”

Harry hissed. “Sometime. I honestly didn’t think of telling you, Draco. I wasn’t holding back on purpose. And we were talking about you and the misuse of your magic.”

“We were talking about you, too,” said Draco. “Don’t you get it, Harry? I’m better when you’re around, at least when you’re being honest with me, because then I can concentrate on your emotions. But when you’re not, then I get bored. And Blaise was emoting all over the place. Did you really expect me to pass up an opportunity like that?”

“Not yet,” Harry admitted grudgingly. “But having me around as a means of controlling your empathy is a crutch, Draco, one that we’ve got to wean you of.”

“Now you’re using mixed metaphors.”

Harry let magic shimmer out of his shields, run up and down his shoulders. “And that’s a sign of impossible ill breeding, I suppose?”
Draco, to Harry’s astonishment, closed his eyes and released a huffy little breath. Then he opened his eyes and said, as calmly as he could, “Look, if you want me to get used to using this empathy alone, I think you’d better adjust the shields. They’re thinning, or something. I’m getting more emotions than I used to, but they’re only the negative ones, irritation and annoyance and anger and so on. And right now I’m feeling your rage, and growing defensive about it, and that just makes me angrier, and that will feed you. Now that I’m an empath, I can’t afford to argue about everything under the sun.”

Harry winced, and let his magic relax, guilty for forgetting that.

“Stop feeling guilt, will you?” Draco muttered, sitting down on his bed and staring expectantly at Harry. “And get inside my head. Bloody shields. Bloody empathy. Bloody Blaise with his bloody crush.”

“Does your mother know you kiss her with that mouth?” Harry answered, but took a seat on the bed in front of Draco. Inexplicably, he was feeling better than he had been when he came from Dumbledore’s office, for all that he hadn’t yelled at Draco until he spent the anger. Just the fact of being able to argue normally with his best friend relaxed him, he thought. He’d missed that the most in the last few months, more than being touched or the inane conversations that he and Draco used to have about Quidditch and homework. He’d missed the idea that he could say almost anything to Draco and have it answered somehow, that here was someone with whom he could be honest and whom it would be very, very hard to drive away.

Draco raised an eyebrow, and Harry realized he’d just been sitting there, hands on the sides of Draco’s face, looking at him and not doing anything. He gave a small, embarrassed cough, and then murmured, “Legilimens.”

He passed into Draco’s head again, and found it more ordered than it had been the last time he’d done this, Halloween night, when the constant chaos of emotions had barely made him able to distinguish the forms of the rooms that housed Draco’s thoughts. Now he could see the grand and graceful home again, and he relaxed further. This was somewhat like the Sanctuary of Peter’s imagining, but more calming by far to Harry. No one was looking at him with Seer’s eyes here. Of course, he was never going to visit the Sanctuary and have people look at him anyway. No, he could feel Draco in every corner, and that was what soothed him.

Carefully, he checked the shields on the empathy. Some of them were indeed wearing thin. Harry adjusted them, smoothing out the rents and moving them so that some of the more pleasant emotions could get through to Draco, too. At last he nodded and backed away, cautiously pleased to note that a few threads of white had mingled with the quicksilver. His shields were quicksilver from Snape’s teaching, but the white was new. Draco was gaining control of the shields—spinning himself into them, at least a bit.

He turned around again, and frowned when he realized a barrier of carved wood blocked his way back out of Draco’s mind. Then he shrugged. He supposed it was something Draco really wanted him to feel, just as he’d wanted Harry to feel how sorry and angry at himself he was on Halloween. Harry stepped forward and put his hand on the barrier, gently pushing it out of the way and passing his fingers through it at the same time, so that he could identify it.

Intense, lazy warmth, the kind that came on a good morning in late spring when all one had to do was lie in bed and not rise for hours yet, while the sunlight crept in through the window…

Harry was past it in a moment, stunned, but coherent enough to think, So Blaise was right. Draco does have a crush.

He shook his head and popped out of Draco’s mind back into his own, smiling gently at his friend. “Congratulations,” he said. “Who’s your crush?”

“That wasn’t a crush,” said Draco, his eyes narrowing at once. “That was love, you idiot.”

Harry grinned, not letting himself pause to think of how long it had been since he smiled like that. Of course he’d think so. He’s a Malfoy. Crushes are for other people. “Of course it is,” he said solemnly. “So, tell me. Who’s it focused on? Lucky girl? Or lucky boy?”

Draco just stared at him with his mouth open. Then he said, “I can’t believe you,” and stalked over to his school trunk, all offended dignity.

Harry shrugged. Guess he doesn’t want to talk about it after all. And I’ve got to meet Connor in the library, anyway.
He stood and left. Draco ignored him the entire time. Apparently, it would be a while before he forgave Harry for bringing up a crush that he didn’t want to talk about, or perhaps for assuming it was a crush.

*That’s all right. I don’t think our disagreements will last forever, any more. That’s one thing that’s gone right, at least, in the midst of everything else going wrong.*

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Harry opened one eye, and waited in silence for a time, until he was sure that snores were coming from Blaise’s and Vince’s and Draco’s beds, and not the tense silence that had lain between them for the past hour. He sat up and rubbed a hand over his forehead, cursing softly as he came away with a palmful of blood.

He needed to do something. The peace he’d got from Draco had lasted a shorter time than he thought, once he got to the library and found Connor sporting a black eye. Harry strongly suspected it was from someone still reluctant to believe that Connor really hadn’t put his name in the Goblet—or perhaps someone who *did* think that Connor hadn’t done that, and was furious over his being chosen anyway.

He’d questioned his brother, tossed references to other students into the conversation and waited to see if Connor would flinch, done everything but use Legilimency to get the answer as to who they were. Connor had steadfastly remained tight-lipped about the whole thing, saying something about “wanting to fight his own battles.”

Harry supposed, since a Gryffindor-fifth year named Cormac McLaggen had come into dinner sporting a target on his buttocks to which a flying donkey tail constantly tried to attach itself, courtesy of the Weasley twins, that his question was somewhat answered and the offender punished.

But that didn’t lessen his sense of helplessness, and the helplessness—muted, so that Draco couldn’t sense it and wake up—was not letting him sleep.

Harry stilled abruptly as an idea came to him. *I could do that, he decided. I have enough research on it now.*

“Dobby!” he called softly. Since Lucius had agreed to let his house elf go free, he shouldn’t mind if Dobby answered a call to Hogwarts instead of Malfoy Manor.

A *crack*, and Dobby appeared beside his bed, peering up with big eyes. Harry was grateful he hadn’t immediately started chattering. Of course, given the other times he had appeared in the room and not awakened anybody, perhaps house elves had the ability to cast silencing charms around themselves before they began to speak.

“I think I’ve learned enough to free you,” Harry said quietly.

“Dobby!” he called softly. Since Lucius had agreed to let his house elf go free, he shouldn’t mind if Dobby answered a call to Hogwarts instead of Malfoy Manor.

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“I think I’ve learned enough to free you,” Harry said quietly.

Dobby’s expression changed. If Harry wasn’t used to watching house elf faces by now, he would not have seen it. But a burning light that hadn’t been there before appeared in the big eyes.

“Dobby would like that very much,” the little elf said.

“Good,” said Harry. “Could you take me to the Forbidden Forest, though? I don’t think I’d better do it here, with all the other house elf webs in Hogwarts. I only think I know how to unbind a frayed one. I wouldn’t want to untie theirs by mistake.” *Not to mention that I don’t have the least idea of how to convince Dumbledore to let the Hogwarts house elves go.*

Dobby nodded, took a step forward, and clasped a hand around Harry’s wrist. Harry endured being squeezed through Apparition with resignation, and found himself in a surprisingly dry and sheltered spot in the Forbidden Forest. He did conjure a *Lumos* to see Dobby by, and also saw they were in a small cave made of several trees bent and hanging together.

He faced Dobby and let out a little nervous breath, squinting. Dobby’s webs at once sprang into being. Now that Harry was looking exclusively at them, he could make out how they wound on and around each other. Yes, there was the web to bind the house elves, and another to insure that they *liked* slavery. Harry curled his lip in spite of himself.

Then he said, to distract himself from the magic he was building up, “Who was the wizard who partially unbound you, Dobby?”
Dobby blinked his large eyes, finally making Harry realize he hadn’t blinked once before that. “Dobby’s master’s name was Decus,” he said.

Harry tilted his head. He recognized the Latin word for “honor” or “glory.” “Do you remember what his last name was?”

“Lestrange.”

Harry nearly let his magic go in his surprise, but then shook his head and went on gathering it. He had to weave exact replicas of the webs in front of him, and so he fixed his eyes on them again. *Strand to the left, knot just below, strand to the right…* “Do you remember why he wanted to unbind your webs?”

“Master Decus wanted to be free,” Dobby whispered, his voice yearning. He had transferred his stare to the model of the webs that Harry was building in midair now. “Master Decus was not like other wizards. He had something else inside him, something that was wild and wanted to be free. Dobby does not remember what it was.”

“A dragon?” Harry asked softly.

Dobby blinked, and then his eyes sparked. “That was it! Dobby remembers!” He clapped his hands and bobbed his head, his ears flapping against his scalp. “Yes, a dragon. Master Decus said to Dobby, he said, ‘Dragons are long-sighted. Dragons cannot be tamed. Dragons are the wildest of all Dark creatures. Remember that, Dobby. Someone someday will need to know it.’”

Harry shivered in spite of himself. *Well, Acies was certainly strange enough that Decus could have been a relative of hers.* “Do you remember what happened to him?”

Dobby glanced up at Harry solemnly. “Master Decus started to lose his mind. The dragon inside him was too wild. It made him do things that Master Decus did not want to do, oh, such wicked terrible things!” Dobby abruptly covered his mouth with one hand and mumbled indistinct words around it.

“What?” Harry asked, glancing back and forth from the webs he was building to the webs he was imitating. “It’s all right, Dobby, you can tell me. I’m hardly about to tell anyone else.”

“Dobby is a bad house elf,” Dobby said, taking his hand away. “One must never speak ill of one’s master!”

Harry ground his back teeth together and let his breath come through his mouth and nose both at once. “In a few minutes, Dobby,” he whispered, “you aren’t going to have to worry about that ever again.”

The webs were complete. Harry knew that the fact that his own created webs were perfect copies of the ones that had so long endured on Dobby was not the result of extraordinary skill on his part. The magic had taken over halfway through, creating small intricate knots where Harry would have blinked and peered through his glasses, and fraying the edges in flawless mirror image replica. His sight of the other webs had faded. There were only Dobby’s to worry about now, and what he meant to do with them.

Harry had expected to feel anxious or excited about now, since this was the first time he’d ever removed a web from just one magical creature, instead of tearing it away, as he had from the Dementors. Instead, he felt focused, calm, as though he were walking a path already set out for him.

*Vates,* Dobby breathed.

The word felt like a signal. Harry leaned forward and touched his hands to the webs. He had known what he would have to do from his research, but he hadn’t *thought* it. His body moved without the guidance of his mind, or before his thoughts.

His hands touched the fraying strands of the webs, and then he vanished inside them.

He no longer stood in the sheltered little cave of trees in the Forbidden Forest, but skimmed down the endless traceries of the web, seeing a clear roof overhead, clear walls racing past him without end, and an indistinct floor sliding under his feet. As if he rode a knife, he sliced the web cleanly down the middle.

When he looked to the sides, he could see other Harrys riding other knives. He was not sure what web he was actually in, the
original or the copy, and it did not seem to matter. What mattered was that he was breaking it.

He came to the first knot, and for a moment, he felt panic. What was he supposed to do with knots, which served as anchors for the web on the free will of the creature they enslaved, and would he be able to remember it in time? He was moving awfully fast.

But his body was already leaping, turning, moving, and then he remembered.

The knots had endured long enough. He could not untie them, as such. And they were too tangled and complicated to find the best thread and simply pull to loosen them.

The best decision was to cut.

Harry pulled up his magic and sent it before him, riding an intense outpouring of will and free will. He was remembering the moment when his own phoenix web had dissolved—the good part of it, the moment in the Owlery when he had fully committed to the vates path, not the moment in the Chamber when Sylarana had died and ripped a good portion of his mind to shreds.

The knot slit apart, and Harry went on sliding through it, bounding up a clear ramp now, slicing through another glassy knot, slipping down a different strand. He became aware that he was laughing. The laughter was not joyous, exactly, but high and hard and proud.

He reached the end of that web, and turned to attack the other one, the one that kept Dobby thinking he liked slavery—

And then he found that that one was gone. He blinked and shook his head, but understood in a moment what had happened. Thinking that no house elf should ever manage to free his magic first, the wizards who wove the original webs had put the net binding free will under and inside the web on their powers. The house elves went on thinking that they wanted to serve wizards, and so of course they would never use magic against them.

Dobby was free.

Harry caught his breath and dropped back into his own body. He watched Dobby stretch his hands, and shake his head, and flash glances here and there, as though his eyes were truly seeing for the very first time.

Then he looked up at Harry.

Harry gazed back at him. He had expected to feel a little touch or thrill of fear, as he had once when he saw a vision of what Dobby might be, fierce and feral. Instead, he felt only a rush of what he knew was joy this time.

He bowed to Dobby, and moved a few steps backward. If Dobby wanted to vanish right now, then Harry was hardly going to stop him.

Dobby extended his long fingers, instead, and snapped them twice. At once, a cloud of colored lights rose from the ground, formed into bubbles, and drifted around Harry. Harry blinked and focused on them, and blinked again when he realized that each contained a small, intricate scene, each one showing a happy family of some different kind of magical creature. It was magic that a wizard would have been hard-pressed to create in the first place, never mind maintain.

“I thank you, Harry Potter.” Dobby’s voice was deeper, and had entirely lost the cringing tone. “I am free now. I can hear the songs of the Forest. And I know what is coming.”

Harry tore his gaze away from the bubbles, and looked at Dobby. “What is coming?”

Dobby tilted his head back. His ears were shrinking as Harry watched, coming to rest closer to his head, elegant and sharply pointed. “Decus Lestrange committed suicide because he could not control the dragon within himself,” he whispered. “Dragons are the wildest of us all. And dragons are coming to Hogwarts. The very night sings of their presence, of their near arrival.”

He opened his eyes and looked at Harry again. Already those eyes were different, too, larger and greener and possessed of a cat-like glow. “Dragons cannot be tamed,” he said, as if it were a proverb, or a prayer.
Harry felt his breath catch. *That’s the First Task. Dragons. It must be.*

“Even dragons will need their *vates,*” Dobby whispered to him. “They are wild, but they are not free. Beware, though, Harry Potter. Wildness can consume even as it exalts.” He looked abruptly past Harry. “And you attract both the consuming and the exalting kind more than most,” he added.

Harry turned around.

A thestral stood behind him, long draconic neck extended and nostrils flaring as it sniffed at him. Harry stood still as the creature walked forward, hooves nearly silent even in the deep leaves, and spread its wings around him. Then it licked at his forehead, with a tongue as cool as grave dirt.

Harry started, and then realized that the thestral must have smelled the blood from his scar. He remained still, and let it take what it wanted. Then it stepped back from him, snorted, and extended a wing.

“The thestral wishes Harry Potter to ride,” Dobby said.

Harry blinked and glanced at him. “Why? I haven’t broken their web yet.”

Dobby laughed. His voice was changing, too, becoming deeper and richer with promise, like the neigh of a unicorn or the song of a phoenix. “Some magical creatures respect you for what you are, Harry Potter,” he said. “Some do not need you to break their web to prove yourself worthy of their attention.”

The thestral snorted at him and stamped a hoof, which Harry didn’t need Dobby to translate. Carefully, he hauled himself onto the thin dark back, clasping the ribs tightly with his legs so he didn’t slide off.

The thestral reared. Harry wasn’t quite sure how it managed things, but the leaves of the trees above them parted, and Harry was gazing straight up at the stars, and especially the black spaces between them, which he hadn’t noticed since Walpurgis Night.

The thestral took off with a powerful kick of its hind legs, and the leaves rushed away, and the earth, and Dobby’s laughter.

What came up to take their place was wind, and darkness, and music.

Harry found himself surrounded by song as they arose. He thought part of it came from the stars themselves, as if the act of freeing Dobby gave them voices he could hear. And surely some was the same deep music that he had heard the night he had run in the Forest, the cheerful voice booming from glen to glade, and some was the wind and the exaltation he always felt in the sky.

And some of it was the same song he had heard in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, from the wards and the creature caged behind the closet door.

*Let me out.*

Harry extended his hands. He was laughing, because he didn’t have any choice. The symphony reached right into him and ripped the laughter out. He threw his head back, and felt the wind pass through his hair and soothe—the first time anything had in days—the pain in his scar. As if in answer, it built to a gale, and roared back at him.

The music grew more and more frenzied, and the thestral dipped its wings and swept in a wide circle. Harry could see Hogwarts beneath them, dark and slumbering, and its grounds, and its lake, and the Forest stretching on, and the curve of the brilliant world rolling beneath.

*You might leave,* said a voice that did not seem distinguishable from the voice of the music, or the Dark creature in his memory. *You might wander the world, setting the magical creatures free and unbinding webs. What obligations have you to lesser wizards? Your power sets you above them. Listen to our song. You might claim us, and we might claim you.*

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. His enchantment had not faded, but other impulses were rising to hedge it in.
“I have the same obligations I always did,” he whispered. “I could fight Dumbledore, and perhaps win, since he’d not looking for an attack to come from my direction. I could attack and kill my enemies. But I can’t. I won’t step on their wills, and I don’t think of myself as better than they are just because I have more magic.”

*But you want to,* said the eager voice. *Some part of you wants to.*

Harry shrugged. “It would be simpler,” he muttered. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to declare myself for the Dark.”

The wind went skipping away from him again, and the chorus of singing voices rose from all directions.

For a moment, Harry let himself bathe in the song, and imagine what it could be like if he did become a fully Dark wizard. He wouldn’t have to torture and kill anyone, not like Voldemort. He could simply move without restraint, righting the wrongs that everyone less intelligent than he was had put in motion. He could free Snape, and free Connor from this stupid Tournament, and unbind the magical creatures. He could free Muggles from their fear and ignorance of wizards, and free wizards from their fear of Muggles. He had enough magic to set the world going the way he wanted it.

It would be simpler.

*Nothing is simple.*

Harry felt pain catch at his heart again, and the song lost all attraction for him. He stroked the thestral’s neck and murmured, “Down again? Please?”

The winged horse dipped without protest, and landed Harry on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry slid off its back and stood for a moment, leaning against it, taking deep breaths.

It hurt to think of his mother, and what she had written in her letter, and what she would think when she received his back.

But the training she had given him had saved him yet again.

*I cannot declare myself for the Dark. That would be too simple.*

He allowed himself a few heartbeats more to glory in that vast music, then gave the thestral a pat on the shoulder, let it lick more blood from his scar, and set off, back to the castle and the world of limitations he had chosen.

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**Chapter Thirty-One: To the Ministry We Go**

Harry closed his eyes. He was tired after an evening and a night spent researching ways to defeat dragons with Connor, a nightmare, and then an explanation session about the nightmare with Draco, but he thought he could still manage this. In fact, he thought his exhaustion would probably contribute to his success.

“*Expelliarmus,*” he whispered aloud, and gestured with one hand.

His wand, which he’d put in the hand of a wooden figure on the other side of the room, flew away from it with great rapidity and vigor. Harry felt a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and was too tired to resist giving it.

*Yes. Perfect. My wandless magic really does work better when I confine it to my body than when I let it spread around me. And if it’s not floating around me hitting at the walls like wings and plaguing everyone, that will make life easier for other people, too.*

He walked over to retrieve his wand, humming under his breath. He froze when he heard the door creak open behind him, though. So far as he knew, no one else had realized he was here, in a small room in the dungeons where Snape used to take him to practice dueling spells while students had detentions in his offices.

Harry turned fluidly around, clutching his wand, and blinked when he saw Dumbledore standing in the doorway. He stood, but said nothing. He had no idea why the Headmaster had sought him out, and lately, when he initiated confrontations, he always seemed to come off the worse in them anyway. He kept his eyes on Dumbledore’s face and waited.
“Harry, my boy.” Dumbledore nodded to him as if nothing had ever changed. Harry wanted to rage and snap that yes it did, yes it had, but he just inclined his head back. “Ready for our trip to the Ministry this morning, I hope?” Dumbledore continued, looking at the walls of the dungeon room with interest, as though they offered something more than stone starred with damp patches and marked irregularly by flickering shadows from the torches.

“What trip to the Ministry?” Harry shifted one foot behind him. He was poised now, ready to dart in several directions. “I know that today is Fudge’s trial, but I thought you were going to vote no confidence.”

“I am, Harry, I am.” Dumbledore gave him a fleeting smile. “I am satisfied that you have kept up your end of our bargain. Lily has shown me your letter herself.”

Harry roped his magic, which wanted to explode out of his body in several dozen different directions, and nodded.

“But you are required to come with me,” said Dumbledore, with a small sigh and a flap of his hand. “One of those tired formalities that require those involved in bringing the motion before the Wizengamot to be present when it’s debated.”

“But I wasn’t the one who suggested the motion,” Harry argued.

“No, but according to Amelia Bones, you were a large part of the reason that she decided to suggest the vote.”

Harry flushed. He could feel Dumbledore’s mild gaze on him, and that was bad enough. He did not want people in the courtroom pointing at him, and whispering that that was the boy who had caused Fudge to be brought to trial.

“You need not speak,” Dumbledore reassured him. “The formalities do not require you to do that. Only to be present, and if someone does have a mild question, about corroborating factual details perhaps, then you can give your answer to the court scribe. Your participation can be limited.”

Harry relaxed. With the way that Dumbledore had come in here, springing this as a surprise on him, he had been afraid that Dumbledore would spring the greater and far more unpleasant surprise of making him a witness. “Then let me eat breakfast, sir, and I’ll be ready to accompany you,” he said.

“Take all the time in the world, dear boy,” Dumbledore said, and stood out of the way. “The trial is set for noon, and since we have special permission to Apparate in to the Ministry, we don’t have to take much time getting there. Meet me in my office no later than half past eleven, though.”

Harry nodded shortly and edged past Dumbledore. It made his skin crawl when the Headmaster looked at him.

This time, though, he could not imagine that this was some plan of Dumbledore’s. Why would it be? Perhaps the Headmaster wanted Harry to witness him voting no confidence, but then inventing this talk of a formality that required him to be there, an easily detected lie, would be pointless. No, probably the formality was real and any benefit that might accrue to Dumbledore from his presence just a side issue.

Harry would make sure to renew his glamours before he entered the court, though, and several other defensive spells he had learned in the past few days, while he and Connor worked on trying to find magic that would fool a dragon. There would still be nosy people poking and prying around the court, perhaps even other reporters than Skeeter. He did not want them carrying back stories about the Boy Who Accused Fudge looking pale or worn or tired.

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“You weren’t in your bed, Potter,” was Millicent’s greeting as he slid into place at the Slytherin table. She had two full plates in front of her, and she pushed one of them towards Harry. “Eat, and then we can talk.”

Harry frowned at her. “You could stop treating me as a child, you know,” he said, and started to eat.

“When you stop acting like one, then I will,” said Millicent. She glanced about, but their part of the table was largely empty; Pansy always slept in on a Sunday, and Blaise and Vince had already finished and gone Merlin knew where. Draco was in the library researching empathy, Harry knew. Millicent leaned nearer to Harry and lowered her voice. “You should stop that, you know. Other people are starting to notice.”
Harry swallowed around a lump that seemed to have frozen in his throat. Another problem. Another damn problem. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Other people are noticing that someone has to coax you to eat, to sleep.” Millicent took a dainty bite, her eyes never leaving his. “And what they notice, their parents notice, at least some of them. You can’t afford to look weak, Potter, and neither can your allies. You should start shaping up soon. Any victories you gain are worthless when you can’t be depended upon to stay on your feet past them, or if you have to spend days in the hospital wing recovering from them.” She raised her eyebrows, the expression she usually had before going in for the kill. “Plus, it doesn’t give most people much trust in your basic common sense.”

Harry frowned and chewed as he considered that. It was true that he didn’t want to inflict public damage on his allies for allying with him. On the other hand, how could he stop? Some of the victories that he won for others were dependent on the time that he spent away from extensive meals and bed rest.

“I could improve the magic that I’m using to prevent people from noticing,” he offered. “I found some spells that—“

“Not enough, Harry.” Millicent’s voice had gone quiet and intense. “That would only solve half the problems. If you’re driving yourself into the ground, you’ll start making mistakes. More, your magic will be more likely to go mad, and that’s what we depend on to win us victories in the first place.”

Harry picked at his food, no longer hungry. Millicent, though, leaned closer and closer, until her stern look filled all his vision. It promised wrath, probably a public scene, if he didn’t finish his breakfast. Harry sighed and started eating again.

“I don’t know what to do,” Harry admitted at last, after several minutes of eating and thinking.

“I do.” Millicent was smug, but at the moment, Harry couldn’t hold it against her. “Delegate, Potter, for Merlin’s sake. Get other people to help you. Don’t try to do everything yourself. It’s what the best leaders have always done.”

Harry resisted the temptation to say he wasn’t a leader. Millicent would ignore him, anyway. “But most of the tasks I have are ones that only I can do,” he argued. “Either because of strength of magic, or because they’re serving people who will only trust me.”

“Name one.” Millicent folded her hands on the table and watched him with a quietude that didn’t fool Harry for a moment. It was the look she wore right before she proved someone wrong in class.

“My duties as vates, for instance,” Harry muttered. “Most of the magical creatures won’t see or converse with anyone but me.”

The Many on his arm stirred, and thrust its head from his sleeve. “What is for breakfast?” it hissed.

“Meat,” said Harry, and fed it, then added to Millicent, “You see? Most wizards aren’t Parselmouths.”

“So my speaking to cobras and Runespoors for you is out.” Millicent waved her hand. “You must have some allies who speak English, Potter.”

“The centaurs, but—“

“And they’ll accept a delegate if you appoint one according to the proper formalities.” Millicent rolled her eyes. “Merlin, but you’re stupid sometimes, Potter. All you need to do is send me to them with a token of your first meeting. I would think you knew that.”

Harry winced. “I didn’t think of it,” he said quietly.

“And that’s the problem, Potter, your not thinking. It’s going to ruin you if you let it.” Millicent shook her head at him. “I think you’ll find many more willing hands than you think you will, if you only ask. Most people our age would be thrilled and excited to help in duties this big. Gryffindors will like the secrecy of it all, and the purebloods in other Houses will like the ceremoniousness. And those of us who are formally allied with you will feel like we’re doing something to help.”
Harry nodded slowly. “Then I’ll find you an egg-shaped stone. That was the token I shattered to save Draco’s life when I first met the centaurs.”

“Save his—“ Millicent halted and shook her head. “Never mind. I don’t think I want all the details of the strange relationship that you two have.”

She paused and watched Harry as if waiting for his response to that, but Harry just looked back in mild puzzlement. “I don’t blame you,” he said at last. “I would imagine that details of friendships are boring to most people not directly involved in them.”

Millicent growled something about blindness and oblivious idiots, hit the table with her hand, and then said, “I’d be glad to do something to help you. And so would Pansy, and so would Blaise. And Draco—you’ve got to see that he would work himself to the bone for you, Harry. I can’t believe you haven’t taken advantage of this fact before now.”

“You all have your own lives.”

“And they’re part of yours. For Merlin’s sake,” said Millicent yet again, but she sounded less displeased this time. “Well, unless you have somewhere to go today, then—“

“I’m going to the Ministry to witness Fudge’s no confidence vote,” said Harry, and began eating in earnest. Despite the few hours that he had before he had to meet Dumbledore, he still wanted to use the time as best he could. The unexpected chunk missing out of his day was going to play merry havoc with his plans. “Apparently, it’s a formality that everyone involved in the motion has to be there to witness it.”

“Yes, there is one of those,” said Millicent, and lightly caught his wrist. “Harry,” she said, and sat there until he looked at her. “If you get in trouble at the Ministry, go to the Department of Magical Games and Sports. I have an uncle who works there, Thor Bulstrode. You can depend on him in times of trouble.”

“I’m just going to witness a trial,” said Harry, caught off guard by the intense look Millicent was giving him.

“This is politics, Harry.” Millicent smiled faintly, but her eyes didn’t relent. “Nothing is ever just one thing.”

Harry nodded his consent and his understanding, and Millicent released his wrist and turned back to her own breakfast. Harry went on eating, more slowly this time, because his mind was plunging around, reordering its conception of the world. Sometimes he forgot, since he lived in Hogwarts most of the year and so many of the things central to his own existence happened here, that his alliances implicated him in a larger world beyond it.

_I should remember that more often_, he thought, and wrote it on a mental scroll, and slid it into place alongside thirty thousand other duties in his library.

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The courtroom where the Wizengamot met could have passed easily for a dungeon room in Hogwarts, Harry thought. It was gloomy enough, with bare, blank stone walls lit by torches in sconces that looked subtly wrong to Harry, though that might only be the spells wrapping them to keep the torches alight. In the center of the room was a chair wrapped with chains. The judges’ balcony loomed above that, and Harry could see most Wizengamot members already there. Pointed hats nodded to each other as they milled between their seats.

“Come, Harry.”

Harry shook his head and followed Dumbledore across the judges’ balcony. He would sit in the center, Harry saw, and there was a small chair positioned directly behind him, where Harry could sit. Even more tension ran out of his muscles at the sight. No one would observe him at all. On the other hand, he could see easily between the members of the court, and if he craned his neck or used a mild Seeing Spell, he could see over the balcony and to Fudge’s chair as well.

“Hem, hem.”

Harry turned his head, and met Umbridge’s eyes.
The witch stood looking at him. She did not smile, and she did not toy with the small pink bows of the cardigan she wore beneath her robes, which only made her look more menacing. Harry supposed she intended to engage him in a staring contest, but he turned his back on her before that could happen, and took the seat that Dumbledore had provided for him.

He did not want to look at her. She reminded him of the pain he had caused, and the foul things hiding inside him. He cast the Seeing Spell that turned a small patch of air in front of him into a window instead, and let him see through solid stone to where Fudge was shuffling into place. He cupped his palm around the window so that no one else could see it.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry felt himself tense, but didn’t look up. “Yes, Madam Umbridge?”

“Such a polite boy,” she said in that kittenish, little girl’s voice. “A piece of advice, sweet child. If today does not work out as you hope, you should still watch your back, rather than your hands.”

“I have eyes in many different directions, Madam Umbridge,” Harry murmured. “That shouldn’t be difficult.”

He felt her pause, as if she were going to add some other dire warning, but then she shook her head and shuffled off to her seat. Harry shuddered. He could only imagine that she was one of Fudge’s appointees to the Wizengamot, and of course she would vote to retain him. He had to hope that most of the other wizards and witches would follow Dumbledore’s lead.

“Mr. Potter.”

This was another witch’s voice, but Harry did not recognize it, and took the chance of looking up. In front of him stood an incredibly old woman, her face so mapped by wrinkles that Harry couldn’t see any smooth skin. The soft blaze of her magic told him that she wasn’t that powerful, but incredibly well-controlled. She was probably older than Dumbledore.

He clenched a hand in front of his heart and bowed, as the young were supposed to do to elders they respected. A wistful smile caused some of the witch’s wrinkles to realign.

“I haven’t seen that gesture in decades,” she murmured. “No one is as polite any more as they are supposed to be.” She extended a small, graceful hand, which Harry gently grasped. “My name is Griselda Marchbanks, Mr. Potter. I suspect we have some friends in common.”

Harry nodded a bit. He’d heard of this woman, who had sat on the Wizengamot for years. “Headmaster Dumbledore, Madam?”

“Not just him,” said Griselda, and leaned closer to him. “Some of them very much shorter than Albus Dumbledore.”

Harry blinked, and abruptly remembered something else about Griselda that he’d heard but forgotten: she supposedly had links with goblin groups who at one time had plotted rebellion against the wizards. He swallowed. “You are involved in _vates_ business, too, Madam?” he asked, and lowered his voice as he did so.

Griselda winked gravely at him. “Never had the power for that path, myself,” she said. “But suffice it to say that I know quite a bit about it, and when seagulls and starlings both are flying back and forth in excitement, I know that someone special has given us what we wanted all along. A chance.”

Seagulls would be from the northern goblins, Harry surmised. He supposed the southern ones must use starlings as messengers. “I would like to speak with you later, Madam, if there’s time.”

“So polite,” Griselda said, in an uncanny echo of Umbridge, and nodded to him, and went to claim her seat. Harry watched her go.

_I suppose, if I can have enemies I didn’t know about, I can have allies that way, too._

“Take your places, please! Take your places, please!”

That was a wizard bearing the old, heavy medallion of a court scribe, whom Harry already didn’t like, if only for his officious manner. He settled back in his seat, though, and directed his attention to his window. Fudge sat in the chain-draped chair, his
gaze traveling over the members of the Wizengamot. His face flickered continually with changing emotions, hope and despair and disgust and grief and uncertainty. Harry shook his head. Has he never learned to hide what he’s thinking?

“The Wizengamot has gathered to cast a vote of no confidence on Minister Cornelius Fudge,” said the scribe, reading from a large and official-looking scroll. “Amelia Bones has called the motion. Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore presiding.”

“Thank you, Edgar,” said Dumbledore, and stood. Harry saw the way that eyes turned towards him as he moved. A barely detectable shimmer of power insured that. Harry shook his head. I can only hope to have that much control over my magic someday. “First, according to the Wizengamot’s Charter, the accused has a right to representation. Have you chosen to waive that right, Cornelius, or would you like to call someone in now?”

“I am not the accused,” said Fudge, his body trembling as he leaned forward in the chair. “This is a vote of confidence or no confidence only. I’ll only lose my job if I lose this, not my freedom or my life.”

Dumbledore beamed at him, from the sound of his voice. “Silly of me,” he murmured. “Forgive me. I do get confused.” A titter moved through the members of the Wizengamot at that. “All right, then, Cornelius. I trust you know why this motion has been brought against you.”

“I know the more ridiculous accusations,” said Fudge. “I want to hear them all, and I want to hear them now.”

“As you wish,” said Dumbledore, and nodded to a gray-haired witch with a monocle and a sharp jaw sitting a few seats down from him. Harry turned to face her, and decided this must be Amelia Bones. She certainly looked strong enough for it. She rose to her feet with a scroll in her arms and a grim expression on her face.

“Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge,” she read out. “You are accused of the following crimes:

“Of forming a secret police force on your own cognizance, called the Hounds, which included ex-Aurors who had been sacked for incompetence or negligence of their duties, thus increasing the danger to the public safety.

“Of executing three persons without trial, thereby violating the rule of law.

“Of arresting at least one person with these Hounds, thus appointing yourself arbiter of right and wrong in a way that the Minister’s office was never intended to be.

“Of abducting a fourteen-year-old wizard called Harry Potter and bringing him to the Ministry without his guardian, thereby putting a child in danger and in legal trouble that he was not legally competent to handle by himself.

“Of using a magical artifact to try and drain Harry Potter’s magic, thus employing a punishment that has been historically used on only the most dangerous and desperate criminals.

“Of claiming the privileges of a Minister in a time of war when no war has been declared, thereby flouting the Wizengamot’s authority.

“Of passing edicts against Dark wizards and Dark magical talents without putting these edicts through due process of law, thus flouting the Wizengamot’s authority once more.”

There were more accusations, but Harry didn’t think he had to listen to them. He sat back, shaking his head, and saw Fudge sink lower and lower in his chair as each accusation was repeated. Madam Bones’s steady, clear voice never faltered.

Harry started sneaking looks at the members of the Wizengamot, trying to decide how they would vote. A few faces were closed, and he could tell nothing from them. Most, however, looked steadily more disgusted as the list rolled on. They might not care anything about him, Harry thought, or even about the people that Fudge had illegally arrested and killed, but they were part of the governing body that Fudge had ignored in making his mad schemes. They had no chance of retaining true power if they left the Minister’s office in Fudge’s hands, and they must know it now. Harry relaxed as the list of accusations finally came to a conclusion, and Madam Bones leaned forward and peered at Fudge as if he were an interesting species of bug.

“Do you have anything to add to this list?” she asked. “Any accusations that you see fit to deny?”
Harry glanced back at the window cradled in the palm of his hand again. Fudge had a mulish look on his face.

“All I did,” he said, “I did for the good of wizarding Britain. Besides, most of those accusations were made by people who had no personal interest in them, weren’t they? I’ve never been approached about illegal executions. It was my political enemies who decided I acted wrongly.”

He held his hands out in front of him and looked from face to face. “Most of you know me,” he said. “I’m a good wizard of good family, Light-declared, who’s always done my best for our world. Who opposes me? Paper-chasers, who don’t even dare to show their faces in court. There’s no one here with a legitimate grievance against me, no one who dares to meet me face to face, flesh to blood. This is all made in passive voice, from an impersonal distance. Oh, yes, very easy to do, isn’t it, when you can’t look the man you’re accusing in the eye? But not one person who actually wants to act as eyewitness to any of these supposed crimes.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel his heart beating in his chest, slow and heavy. No one had looked at him yet, except Griselda. No one had even noticed that he was here, seemingly. His own power was shielded by Dumbledore’s, and his chair was in a secure and sheltered place. He had no need to rise to his feet and confront Fudge. He was going to lose anyway. This was too little, too late. Harry didn’t have to answer Fudge’s bluster.

“You’re wrong,” said another calm, clear voice, which did not belong to Madam Bones. “There is one wizard here who did dare to come and face you, and he’s the youngest of your victims.”

Harry opened his eyes, turned his head, and met Scrimgeour’s gaze. He sat behind Madam Bones’s chair, his bad leg propped out in front of him, his eyes steady and without mercy.

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Rufus had become aware of young Harry almost at once. He’d been around Dumbledore too many times not to notice what seemed an addition or augmentation to his power. In fighting the compulsion to pay attention to the old wizard, even when Amelia was reading out the accusations, he’d turned his face in the right direction and seen Harry, half-in and half-out of the shadows.

And he’d known why Dumbledore would have brought him, and he knew what a chance he had, especially when Fudge made that idiotic plea for one of his accusers to rise and confront him.

Rufus did feel a pang of sympathy for the boy, whose green eyes were saying, all too clearly, that he did not want to take this chance, that he would not even dignify Fudge with a response if he had the choice.

But Harry did not yet understand the way Ministry politics worked, not completely. Fudge could be ripped out, but he would leave roots behind, most especially that odious Umbridge. Rufus did not want him to leave behind any roots of respect, though. It would be better if Fudge’s last moments in front of the Wizengamot were utterly tarnished, if there was no lingering doubt in the Elders’ minds that they had done the best thing.

And Dumbledore seemed all too content to keep the boy hidden, not displaying him the way that Rufus would have thought he would, if he wanted to show the world that Harry was under his control. Whatever Dumbledore wanted was something that Rufus Scrimgeour usually wanted to oppose.

Rise, Harry, Rufus said silently in his own mind. I think that we may have left it alone too long already. There are some here to whom you will be a surprise, and that is not the way it should be.

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Harry swallowed and stood. He felt gazes moving towards him, necks craned awkwardly and chairs turned around, and Scrimgeour suggested calmly, “Perhaps young Potter should move to the center of the court, so that all involved can see him?”

Harry shuddered as he imagined those eyes crawling like spiders down his shirt, but he inclined his head and made his way off the judges’ balcony, until he could stand on the floor of the courtroom. He ignored Fudge’s gaping mouth. He felt compelled to back up until he was at least not hurting his own neck, meeting the eyes of the Wizengamot members.
“Now, Cornelius,” said Madam Bones, in a faintly amused voice, “you were saying something about none of your accusers facing you? And what did you want to say to Mr. Potter?”

Harry glanced at Fudge from the corner of his eye. The Minister’s face had gone white, though, and it was only too obvious that he didn’t have anything planned for this eventuality. His mouth was flopping open and then shut again, as if he were a fox caught in a trap.

“Mr. Potter,” said Madam Bones then. “Do you have anything to say to Minister Fudge?”

The stares intensified. Harry could gladly have shucked his own skin, as bad, as unnatural, as it felt, to have all these people paying attention to him.

He carefully pushed his discomfort under the surface of a pool of quicksilver, the way Snape had taught him. He had a chance to do some good here, something that mattered to more people than just himself alone. Perhaps he should thank Scrimgeour for the opportunity after all, though at the moment he wasn’t particularly inclined to.

He turned and faced the Minister. Fudge was looking at him as if faintly curious what he might say. Harry fixed his gaze and his awareness only on him. It was easier that way than if he tried to imagine everyone else staring at him. Merlin, his breath was coming fast, and if he—

Harry chopped off the thoughts, not letting them continue. He met Fudge’s eyes, and began.

“I always thought of the Minister as someone who served the public interest, sir,” he said quietly. He knew that the courtroom’s acoustics, and carefully placed spells, would repeat his words in the ears of everyone in attendance, though. “I suppose I didn’t think much about that. It was just the sort of thing I learned as a child, the way that other children learned things.

“I began to question the Ministry’s actions last year, when I realized they had passed legal restrictions against werewolves. I’ve had a very dear friend in a werewolf, Remus Lupin, and he had been taking the Wolfsbane Potion for the last year. It worked. There’s finally a potion that could give werewolves hope, and then they had it taken away, because the Ministry forbade them to have custody of a child, to hold a paying job, to borrow money. They were about to become productive members of society, and now they’re going to be more desperate than ever.

“I suppose that’s when a lot of my romantic illusions about the Ministry shattered, assuming that I had any left. I no longer thought that they worked for the good of wizarding Britain. I thought they worked for the good of part of wizarding Britain, and only that.”

Harry paused. His breath was still coming fast, if he let it; his body was not convinced by his mind’s insistence that only one person was watching him, and neither was the training he had received from Lily. The impulse to flee from the room was fading, though. He could do this. He could go through with this.

“And then I had that confirmed this summer, when you kidnapped me,” he finished. “I knew that even children weren’t safe. I thought no one in the Ministry would ever take me to an illegal trial, ever take me somewhere without my guardian’s consent, ever try to drain my magic. But you did, and—“

“I did not!” Fudge interrupted harshly.

“I can fetch a Pensieve, Minister, if you would like,” said Madam Bones, all concerned helpfulness.

Harry felt his body stiffen. No. They would all see him hurting Umbridge if they did that, and Harry did not want to remember what he had done. Sick shame was already bubbling in his gut like vomit.

But Fudge, luckily, shrank from the offer. “No,” he said. “No. I only meant — I meant that there were extenuating circumstances that the child does not understand.” He gave Harry a sickly sweet smile, which Harry returned with a level glance.

“Do explain them, Minister,” said Madam Bones. “This is a very serious matter, and though of course this is a motion for a vote of no confidence and not a trial to put you in Azkaban, we would like to understand everything that surrounds it. Every extenuating circumstance, every unusual occurrence, should be explained in full.”
Fudge went pale again. “I do not wish to speak,” he said, and tried to put his head up and strive for a look of dignity.

Madam Bones waited, then said, “Did you have anything else to say, Mr. Potter?”

Harry shook his head. I know that Scrimgeour probably wants me to do something more, but I don’t know what it is, and I don’t want to stand here. “Just that that day irreparably broke my trust in the Minister,” he said. “I think I could trust again, but only if justice is truly served this day.” He gave a little bow to signify that that was the end of it.

“Very well, Mr. Potter,” said Madam Bones. “Please return to your seat.”

Harry climbed the stairs again, and resumed his tiny chair. The Wizengamot was stirring and murmuring, most of the wizards and witches turning at least once to look at him, and then looking away again. Harry ducked his head, and felt his cheeks turning steadily and steadily more crimson, his heart hammering loud enough, finally, to obscure the murmurs.

Did Scrimgeour even accomplish what he wanted to accomplish with that? I hope so. I’m certainly not doing it again.

*******

Rufus watched with a faint smile as Harry took his seat, and shook his head. The boy didn’t seem to realize what he’d done, even by speaking his short little piece that emphasized werewolf rights at the expense of his own. He was still young, at least in looks, and he had had the courage to face the Minister, and Fudge hadn’t been able to answer him in any way. The Minister’s last moments were forever tarnished now, and he was a weakening, and Rufus no longer had any doubt that the Wizengamot would cast a vote of no confidence to throw Fudge out of office.

And, more to the point, the boy’s magic had poured off him like heat off a phoenix, once he was away from Dumbledore’s shielding influence.

Things were changing even as Rufus watched, small currents of thought traveling through the Elders’ minds. Harry realigned the world just by walking around, and he’d done it again here. Rufus would be content with that. The world should change, with the advent of a new Minister.

And it’s about to change even further. Amelia had told him—well, told many people—of her own plan. Rufus hadn’t told anyone of his.

He watched calmly as Amelia called for the vote. Three members of the Wizengamot voted to retain Fudge as Minister. Two abstained. Three weren’t there.

That still left forty-three witches and wizards who voted that they had no confidence left in Cornelius Fudge, and cast him, resoundingly, out of office. Amelia cast her vote with a small smile, Dumbledore with a calm voice and a glance darted at Rufus as the voting moved on around the circle.

Rufus met his eyes. Oh, yes, scowl at me, Light Lord, if you must. I’m taking the Ministry back, and in a moment, you’ll see how.

Amelia clapped her hands, and two of Rufus’s Aurors came to escort a dazed Fudge back to his own office—or the room that had been his office until just a few moments ago. “Now,” said Amelia. “I realize that an event of great moment has just taken place, but we must not leave our poor island in the lurch for long. I call for an emergency election for Minister to take place, no later than the first day of January. In the meantime, the Wizengamot will govern Britain. Is there anyone who wishes to say nay?”

There was a deafening silence. Fudge’s supporters, Rufus saw, including that horrible Umbridge woman, scowled, but remained silent.

Amelia nodded. “All the rules for emergency elections apply. Candidates for Minister may offer themselves at any point before the New Year. They may campaign with all tactics that are legal in a more usual race for office. I would like to announce my own candidacy at this time.”

There were a few surprised noises, but not many. Amelia really had been cultivating the ground. Rufus nodded, and waited.
Amelia looked around with a faintly bored expression. “Would anyone else like to announce themselves as candidates now?”

Rufus gave a little cough and stood. He felt surprised eyes swing his way—and Dumbledore’s, at least, were dismayed. He liked that.

“I would,” he said off-handedly.

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Harry blinked, then shook his head. Oh. That was why he called on me, then. This had something to do with preparing his own campaign for Minister. Maybe he wanted to make absolutely sure that Fudge would be defeated.

Harry shrugged, and put it out of his head. His own part was done now, except for the meeting with Griselda. He stood, looking for the old witch in the sudden movement of people, but found Dumbledore in front of him.

“Harry,” said the older wizard with extreme firmness. “I really think that we should be returning to school.”

Harry sighed and nodded, reluctantly. He was unwilling to make a scene now, not when people were still glancing at him, and he didn’t want Dumbledore to know that he was interested in an alliance with someone who had links to goblin groups. I can always owl her.

“Just a moment, Albus,” said Griselda’s voice just then. “I wanted to congratulate Mr. Potter. That was a fine piece of oratory that you did there, young man.” She held out her hand, as if for the first time, and Harry shook it. “Have you ever considered a career in politics?”

Harry met her sparkling eyes, and did his best to smile. “Not really, Madam,” he said. “I keep busy.”

“I’m sure that you must,” she murmured. “But politics isn’t incompatible with a busy life, you know. In fact, it’s the cause of busy lives in other people.”

Harry could feel his own smile turning more natural. “I’m sure, Madam,” he said. “But I prefer to work with people, and not just the framework of the Ministry. No matter who the people are,” he added, hoping she would interpret that the way he meant it. Goblins are people, too.

“Ah. A distaste for bureaucracy. Well, sometimes that produces admirable bureaucrats. But someone who can get his way through other means might not need that.” Griselda’s eyes shifted as if to look at something in the air around him.

My magic. Harry decided that Millicent was right, and his exhaustion must be affecting the way he controlled his power. He really wanted the damn stuff confined to his body. More than that, though, he wanted to stop Griselda before she could wander onto paths he wouldn’t walk.

“Not at all, Madam,” he said. “I prefer to work with people. Not against them, not above them, but with them.”

Griselda’s face softened. “I understand that impulse, Mr. Potter,” she said quietly. “It led me into the Ministry. Perhaps your inclinations will take you down the same path, or a different one, but no less valuable.”

“I hope so, Madam.”

Dumbledore insisted on hustling him away then, and Harry didn’t get a chance to say anything more. He lifted his head, gave a shuddering breath, and forced himself to consider this a victory.

We got Fudge out of office. We did it. And whether Scrimgeour or Madam Bones becomes our next Minister, as I can hope one of them will, he or she will be a better Minister than Fudge ever dreamed of.

I’ll have to tell Draco that I nearly panicked in front of the Wizengamot, though. How in the world am I ever going to be a leader at this rate? It really would be better for me to work from the shadows, or from within the Forest. That gets just as much accomplished without all this staring, and then I won’t fail anyone.
At least that didn’t take as long as I thought it would. Now, I can get more things done this afternoon.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Last Day Before

“Who’s that from?”

Draco was quick, and curious, and leaned across Harry’s shoulder as though he would snatch a sight of the name written on the outside of the envelope. Harry was quicker, though, and managed to cover the envelope with one hand.

Not that it would have told Draco anything anyway, Harry realized as he looked down, ignoring the dull twinge that seemed to pull to the left side of his chest. There was only his own name, Harry, written in a delicate hand. The difference was that he knew that hand, and he already knew he would have to read the letter alone.

“Well, who’s it from?” Draco demanded again.

Harry shook his head again, and slid the envelope into a pocket of his robe. “No one,” he said.

“It can’t be no one,” said Draco, and peered into his face. Harry could feel a distant tug on his mind that he suspected was Draco’s empathy working, trying to coax the truth out of him. “Nobodies don’t write on parchment, and nobodies don’t put your name on envelopes.” He lowered his voice, though Harry could feel most of the Slytherin table watching them already. “Nobodies don’t make you look as though you’ve received a blow to the solar plexus.”

Harry swallowed. He knew he couldn’t tell Draco the truth. Draco would demand to know what Harry thought he was doing, and even if Harry explained, he wouldn’t understand most of it, not really. “Draco,” he whispered. “Please. I’ve yielded other things to you, the contents of my nightmares and the contents of my emotions, without complaining. Leave me this.”

“I could do that a lot more easily if you didn’t look the way you look.” Draco’s irritated flush had faded, and now his face was pale. “Harry, I think you should tell me. Not because I want to know, but for your own sake.”

“It’s important to me,” whispered Harry. “It’s something I really need privacy on.”

Draco let out a long breath in which Harry could hear many emotions, including the irritation that he’d obviously tried to dismiss. Then he put one hand over Harry’s wrist and squeezed.

“When you’re ready to talk, come to me,” said Draco. “Don’t—I don’t know, don’t go and blab everything to your brother, not if he wouldn’t understand either. I want to know.”

Harry met his eyes, gauging his willingness to know. Draco did seem sincere. He nodded, once.

Draco smiled at him, though the expression was strained, and withdrew his hand. “Pass the pancakes this way, Blaise,” he said, waving a lazy hand at the platter still sitting in front of the other boy. “I’m not minded to wait while you fill your pockets with them. Thinking of feeding them to your little lion, later?”

Blaise flushed and almost hurled the platter down the table. “At least I have the courage to talk to my crush,” he said spitefully.

Draco drew his wand under the table, and muttered a quick spell that Harry couldn’t hear properly. A moment later, Blaise’s hair turned pink. He didn’t notice, at least until the snickering sped up and down the table. Draco slid his wand back into his sleeve, looking pleased with himself.

Harry shook his head, but couldn’t bring himself to scold. Not when he was sure that his voice wouldn’t shake when he spoke. Not when Draco watched him from the corner of his eye as if he might collapse at any second.

He forced his own breathing calm, and accepted the pancake platter as Draco slid it to him in turn. His stomach churned unpleasantly, but he did have to eat. Apart from classes and the letter to answer later, this was the last Friday in November. That made it the last day before the First Task.
He had to help Connor find a way to defeat the dragons, and soon.

******

“I don’t know,” Connor whinged, tossing aside *Dragons and Their Origins*. “I think that Viktor and Fleur must have all the good books out. There’s nothing in here.”

Harry glanced up from a book of glamours he’d been studying. “I told you what I think you should use.”

“And I told you why it wouldn’t work.” Connor was obviously trying hard to be patient. He flinched when Madam Pince glared at them over her glasses, and lowered his voice. They were, technically, not supposed to be in the library, since they were both skiving off classes. “I can wrap myself in a glamour to discourage scent and sound and sight, but we haven’t found any glamours to disguise the vibrations of my footsteps on the ground. And you were the one who told me that dragons were closely related to snakes. They would feel me coming.”

Harry chewed his lip and flipped through the book again. That was true, but Harry couldn’t shake the—perhaps foolish—hope that glamours were their best bet. He’d got much useful information out of this book, particularly a scent-defeating glamour that he had wrapped around himself now, just in case Hawthorn came by. And it wasn’t as though Connor had any other ideas. He wasn’t good enough at Transfiguration or Charms to use the defenses against the dragons that Harry had first hit upon, and suspected the other Champions would be using.

Harry flipped another page, and found that he’d come to the end of the book’s section on glamours. He sat up when he saw the title of the next one: Illusions.

“Connor,” he whispered.

“What?” Connor glanced up from using his wand to scratch at the table, obviously working hard to look bored instead of terrified out of his mind.

“What about casting illusions to fool the dragon?” Harry asked. “And wrapping the glamours around them? They wouldn’t have the vibrations of your footsteps, that’s true, but I think they might be distracted enough by all the different scents and sights to not realize that none of them were you. And you could, if you really tried, make illusions solid enough that they might cause vibrations.”

Connor brightened for a moment, then let his face fall. “Wouldn’t work,” he said. “It would still have to be a lot of illusions, to keep me safe from the dragon’s flame. And I can’t control that many.”

Then he went still, his eyes shining but an odd expression around his mouth, and Harry felt a surge of hope.

“What?” he asked.

“I—I forgot,” Connor whispered. “I’ve tried so hard to forget everything about the end of last year.” He glanced at Harry. Harry met his twin’s eyes. He understood perfectly why Connor would want to forget the end of last year. His brother was the only one who would ever know that as well as he did.

“Go on,” he said.

“Towards the end, Voldemort was teaching me to use my compulsion gift on my own spells,” said Connor quietly. “It’s not that they have minds, exactly, but spells that look like humans can—fool the compulsion, sometimes. The compulsion reaches out and controls them the way that it would try to control a mind, or a wizard who’s more powerful and well-trained than I am would control many spells at once. The way Hermione does, maybe.” Connor grinned for a moment. “Wonder what she’d say if I told her that she has a gift like compulsion.”

Then his grin vanished, and he looked hard at Harry. “If I could just cast the illusions and the glamours, then I could use compulsion to control them, make them obey my wishes. I could send them in the directions I wanted. It’d still be risky, because the dragon might flame at me, after all, and I’d have to cast the other spells all at once, in a very short time. But I might be able to manage it.”
“Do you know the incantation for a mirror image of yourself?” Harry asked.

Connor nodded. “Dupliciter. Siri—Voldemort taught me that one when he was practicing with me.” Connor looked somewhat ill, as he did whenever he remembered that he’d been taking lessons with the Dark Lord himself. “I can do that easily enough. And then the glamours—wrapping them around the illusions will be the hard part. I’m more practiced with the illusions and the compulsion than I am with them.”

“Then let’s practice, shall we?” Harry asked, standing and picking up an armful of books to take them back to the shelves.

Connor looked at him with a faint, horrified admiration. “What? And miss lunch, too?”

Harry snorted. “You know as well as I where the kitchens are.” The only difference there was that Harry had learned it from the house elves, in his first, tentative talks with them, and Connor had learned it from the Weasley twins. “We can eat later. But, Merlin, Connor. I want you to survive this.”

Connor grinned slightly as he stood. “Me, too,” he said. “That would be nice.”

Harry hugged him briefly, ignoring Madam Pince’s tutting. “I won’t let you die, whatever happens,” he whispered. “But I do want you to be able to succeed on your own if it’s at all possible. I know that you didn’t choose this, but—”

“No, I’ve become reconciled to it, a bit.” Connor’s voice was resigned. “No one else’s name is coming out of the Goblet, and I’ve got to do the best I can. The honor of Hogwarts, and all.”

Harry’s heart clenched at the words. He wanted to spend more time with his brother, to demand the names of the people who’d hurt him, to hug him again and reassure him it would be all right.

He could only say, “Let’s find one of the abandoned classrooms to practice the spells in.”

******

“Dupliciter!”

Harry held his breath as his brother’s image multiplied, then doubled again and again and again. He was good with the illusions, Harry acknowledged. Voldemort had apparently been an exacting taskmaster, trying all the time to draw Connor further under his influence.

Harry shook away the dark memories. He was fine. He was past them now. They were gone, and he had to concentrate on helping his brother survive the dragons.

“Dissimulo aspectum, dissimulo sonitum, dissimulo odoratum—“

Harry shook his head as he watched the spells falter again. Connor was concentrating, his face bright red as he chanted, casting the spells as fast as he could, but it was no use. They only wrapped one illusion at a time, and meanwhile the illusions were fading as Connor lost control of them before he could reach out with his compulsion. And those were only the weak glamours, the ones they’d decided to try to see how fast and hard Connor could cast. They weren’t of the strength it would take to fool a dragon.

Harry wasn’t quite ready to give up on the plan yet, though. His mouth tasted of ashes when he thought about the fact that the First Task was tomorrow, and there was no more time. He had to do something, so he would.

“Connor,” he said, as the last of the illusions faded and Connor glanced at him in exhaustion. He flicked sweat from his brow, flipping up his fringe and bringing his scar into view. Harry felt his own twinge as if in sympathy. “This isn’t working.”

“But it has to,” Connor insisted, sitting down on one of the crooked, broken desks in the corner. He traced patterns in the dust with a finger, not looking at Harry. “We don’t have time to try anything else.”

Harry shook his head. “I wasn’t entirely talking about that,” he said. “What we need is a spell that combines illusions and glamours, one that you can cast just a few times, so you can start controlling your illusions with your compulsion.”
Connor sighed. “I don’t know any spells like that.” Abruptly, he slammed his hand down on his desk, not even seeming to notice when he scraped his fist open. “Shit! If I was just stronger, I wouldn’t have any problem casting this many spells at once or making the illusions more solid, and then everything would be fine.”

Harry winced. There weren’t many times when he felt actively guilty for having stronger magic than most people did, but this was one of them. He pitched his voice low and soothing as he moved towards Connor. “Off the top of my head, I don’t know one that includes the scent glamour in an illusion, even if it does include sound and sight. It’s not all right, I know. But I want to try something.”

Connor sighed again, the anger burnt out as quickly as it had flared. “You might as well, Harry. Nothing is impossible for you.”

Harry chose to ignore the jealousy in his voice. He closed his eyes and sank into the depths of his memory, where book pages flipped past at speed. There was the one that would let him cast a solid illusion, a spell that he’d used more than once, when he wanted to leave a copy of himself in bed or at a meal and fool Draco and Snape into thinking he was there. It was limited, since the illusion would only say a few phrases and fade out of existence in a short time, but he thought a variation of it, the way he’d learned to vary the Flame Mirror spell, might serve.

“Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu,” he said.

The words rippled oddly in his mouth, and for a moment, Harry thought it wasn’t going to work, or that his wandless magic, which he’d confined strictly to his body for the past days, was about to break out and crash into and bounce off things. But then he heard Connor breathe something like, “To the life,” and Harry opened his eyes and saw a copy of himself standing before him.

He took a step forward, and a cautious sniff. He grinned when he caught a scent of sweat. That wasn’t everything he smelled like, but then, the dragon would hardly be familiar with Connor’s ordinary scent, either.

“What about vibrations?” his brother asked, hazel eyes alight. “Could we do that?”

Harry nodded, and turned to an empty patch of space. “Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare!”

Another copy of himself appeared, smelling of sweat. Harry focused on it, asking it silently to walk forward, and it did, shuffling along. He could clearly feel the shifts of the feet and the trembling in the floor.

Harry chuckled and dismissed the image, then looked at Connor. “You won’t want one that steps that heavily, I know,” he said. “But the spell is going to be useful anyway.”

“You’re damn right it is.” Connor’s face was alive again, eyes all but glowing. He stood and drew his wand. “How did the spell go again? Aede—”

“Aedi,” Harry corrected, and set about teaching his brother the correct pronunciation. Connor was managing weak efforts in a few minutes, driven by the same strength and energy he put into Quidditch. Harry felt his tension dissolve into a rush of joy as he watched him. He was going to survive this after all. Harry was not going to lose his brother. There was a possible failure that he was not going to have to bear.

And watching someone else happy made him happy. Thus he passed the most enjoyable part of his afternoon.

Other things were—not so enjoyable.

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Harry leaned his back against the Owivery wall and opened his letter. He knew that he was going to get into trouble. McGonagall never took kindly to anyone missing Transfiguration, sick or not, late or not, and Harry had missed all his classes that day. He’d used a Disillusionment Charm to escape several confrontations with irate Slytherins. He was sorry. He was sorry for all of it. But he simply could not stand to have anyone around him when he looked at the letter inside that envelope that had come this morning.
Dear my son:

I was grateful to receive your letter, and to know what you thought about what had happened between us. I must admit, I didn’t expect that interpretation. I didn’t realize that I’d trained you so well, or that you had thought about issues like this so long and so thoroughly.

I think, Harry, that if you look at the difference between your allies and myself, you’ll find that what separates us is motive. Your allies did what they did for a belief in pureblood superiority that you know is utterly untrue. Or they did it because they were afraid of the fanatical madman they had chosen to follow. Then they tried to escape the consequences of their choices by claiming they’d been under the Imperius Curse. I know the Ministry won’t touch them now, so you need have no fear of my using your letter against them. But they never really repented. They simply took advantage of a loophole in the laws.

Whereas I—I have faced my crimes, and paid for them.

Doesn’t there come an end, Harry, a point at which one must cease to take vengeance or exact justice? You seem to have reached it with your allies, or would have demanded an answer from them long since. I wish you could reach it with me. I have lost my magic. I have admitted that I would have raised you differently had I known what your power truly meant. I have read your words saying that I have possibly saved the world by making you what you are.

When does the point come at which the bitterness and hatred cease to exist? I am tired of hatred, Harry, and tired of being afraid. I admit that I hated you in the first moments after you took my magic, but now it’s gone, and Dumbledore has made sure that I have everything I need. Now I’m simply weary. I want my boys home again. I want to hold my husband in my arms. I want to know that one of our oldest friends in the world is at least alive, even if he has no intention of seeing us again. It’s too late for Sirius. It’s too late for the rest of us, unless one of us dies before we reconcile.

I do not want that to happen.

I realize that you have no reason to write to me anymore, at least not the same sort of reason you had before. I hope you will keep it up anyway. I would claim, Harry, that no other person alive knows you so well, and one of the pieces of knowledge I have of you is that you will write back.

All my love,

Lily.

Harry lowered the letter and put his head on his knees. His breath was coming short, and he felt, horribly, as if he were about to cry. He scrubbed at his eyes. If he started crying now, he knew, he wouldn’t stop. Worry over Connor had kept him awake last night, that and racing thoughts. He was losing his ability to remain awake without it affecting his emotions, even as Millicent had said he would. He couldn’t let that happen. He had to remain strong, awake, aware, if only for his allies. He would dose himself with a sleeping potion tonight.

He had managed to remain as alert and aware as he had so far thanks to Lily’s training. Hours spent in studying, hours spent in concentration, practice at being a sentry, depriving himself of sleep when necessary and getting used to the resulting sensations…all those were techniques he had trained in, and things that he knew how to do. All of those, she had said, she had share in, either observing him when he was practicing them, the only one who did, or actually suggesting them. She was a huge part of his life. She knew so much about him that Harry was not about to reveal to anyone else, ever.

How could he just leave her behind, cut her off when she was reaching out for contact?

Oh, part of it was painful, of course, the same urge that might tell him to nudge a dangling tooth with his tongue. But he couldn’t not write back. He might have managed it if she had written him a letter full of scathing hatred, or one in which she simply urged him to drop his allies and become a Light wizard. But she hadn’t.

Because she knew you would reject that, whispered a voice in his head that sounded like Snape’s. She is using her knowledge of you against you, Harry. You know that, just as you know that part of the reason you want to forgive her is that she trained you into that.

Harry banished the voice, and sat in silence as clear-headed as he could make it for a moment, with fatigue and pain battling for preeminence. He had to consider needs and duties other than those he owed himself and Lily. Last weekend had reminded him that he was part of a wider context. What would that wider context say about this? Would writing back to Lily help other
Even there, though, there was a conflict. He knew that Snape and Draco would urge him not to write back. He knew that Millicent and Pansy and Blaise would sneer, and say that she’d got what she deserved—if they knew the full story, which none of them did—and that being a Muggleborn witch was only one step up from being Muggle anyway, and she’d reverted to her natural condition of life. (He had never confronted them about that, either).

But he also knew that he would not be able to think about anything else until he had written back, that the unanswered letter would nag him both with pain and a sense of guilt. The guilt would unbalance his reactions to everything else, and he couldn’t afford that. The pain was not so easy to get rid of, but he would endure a swift, clean stroke better than a festering wound in the back of his mind.

He took a deep breath, and drew parchment from his robe pocket. It was not the honesty-charmed parchment he’d taken from Dumbledore. He was going to be honest anyway, of course. His mother knew him well enough to be able to tell if he lied.

_Lily:_

_I don’t see how we can reconcile, ever. How can we? Dad and I have problems between us now. I have a much better relationship with Connor than I did last year, but I’m not sure it would survive reuniting our family. And you—_

_I—_

Furious with himself, Harry squeezed his eyes shut. A tear had had the nerve to fall on the parchment, and now he couldn’t think of what to write. His throat ached as if he’d been running for miles in freezing cold air. He waited, swallowing several times, until the tears had gone and he could continue. He knew he’d had a narrow escape from the flood of emotion that was waiting for him.

_I know that you made me what I am. And there are times I hate and loathe that. But it’s saved me so much recently. It spared me from incredible temptations. It’s helped me and my allies achieve victories, a few in the last couple of weeks. So I can’t say that I hate and disclaim you, because you’re so bound up with that, and you’re the only one I’ll ever be able to really discuss it with. There are times I burn to discuss it with someone, but not the kind of people who wouldn’t understand. And you’re the only one who will understand, as well as the only one who knows._

_And you’re right that I can’t ignore it, and periods of restitution do have to have an end. I’m not ready for that end yet, though. I’m not ready to see you, not ready to forgive you for the phoenix web, not ready to try and reconcile._

_Please, don’t send me any more letters. I was only good at answering the first one because I thought I had to be. This isn’t a good letter, and I know it, but it says what I want it to say._

_Harry._

He finished it, and choked back the large lump trying to rise up his throat, and stood, calling for Hedwig. She landed on his shoulder, and he stroked her feathers for a moment, forcing himself to focus on the incredible whiteness of them. She was the only snowy owl in the Owlery. She looked beautiful when she was flying. She had carried his truce-gifts to Lucius. He thought about all those things, to avoid thinking about what she was carrying right now.

He bound the letter to her leg. “Lily Potter, girl,” he whispered, when she looked at him expectantly.

Hedwig nibbled at his ear, and hooted softly, a sound that Harry could convince himself was sad if he let his mind run about like a mad thing. Harry watched her fly out of sight. He could see a web binding her if he looked, but he closed his eyes and turned away. He had to admit that he wasn’t ready to see the webs, not yet. He had to be a vates, and he had to be one whenever a magical creature needed him, but there was no magical creature requiring his help just at the moment. The webs only existed. He could unbind them in time.

_“There you are.”_

Harry jolted. He hadn’t realized anyone was coming up the Owlery stairs, and he really should have, since he could recognize the feel of this woman’s magic. He pressed his back against the stones and murmured, “_Dissimulo odoratum, dissimulo_—“
“It’s too late, Harry.” Hawthorn Parkinson’s voice was gentle. “I’ve already smelled you. And seen you, too.”

Harry heard a rustle, and suspected that she was kneeling down on the floor of the Owlery, utterly forgetting her fine robes. He was startled beyond all bearing when she reached out and gathered him into her arms. She didn’t hold him very close, loosening her hold a bit when he struggled, but she didn’t let him go completely, either.

“What are you doing here?” he whispered.

“I asked the Headmaster for permission to visit Pansy,” Hawthorn said.

“But you aren’t.”

Hawthorn shrugged, or at least Harry thought so from the motion of her arms on his shoulders. “I did see my daughter. I came to look at someone else on whom most of us depend, too.”

“I’m better than I was on Halloween.” Harry pitched his voice as convincingly as he could. To his horror, it wasn’t very convincing. He tried to withdraw behind his Occlumency shields, and found even those shredded, as though his emotions were briars and had punched holes in them. He wrapped one arm around his face. That much he could manage, at least, so that Hawthorn wouldn’t see his tears. He did not want her to think him weak, not when they had sworn formal alliance together just a year ago. That would weaken her, too. “I am trying to take care of myself. I know it’s not working very well right now, but my brother faces the First Task tomorrow. I’ll be better when that’s past. I’m going to take a sleeping potion tonight.”

“It should never have come to this point in the first place,” said Hawthorn, voice low and determined. “It will not come to this point in the future.”

Harry’s uncertain emotions wavered and tipped over into anger. He felt a wind pick up, blowing around the Owlery, and the stones at his back frosted over. Hawthorn took a sharp breath, but didn’t withdraw from him.

“I don’t care how many spies you put on me,” Harry snapped, still not lowering his arm. The tears weren’t gone yet, not entirely, though he could manage a ferocious scowl in a few minutes. “I’ll still work as hard as I can, and I would think you would appreciate that, since some of that work benefits you.”

Hawthorn was silent for a long moment. Then she said, “Harry, I am going to tell you a story.”

Harry snorted.

“Not a fey tale,” said Hawthorn. “A real one. A story that started not much more than a year ago.

“There was a witch once who did things she wasn’t proud of. She wouldn’t disown them, but she wasn’t proud of them. When someone came to her and wanted her to renew those activities, she refused. She was proud enough to think there would be no retaliation for refusing. She had a lovely home now, and a wonderful husband, and a pretty daughter. She had a life. She’d moved on and left those dark things behind. How could they touch her?

“They did, of course. They touched her so deeply that they put a wolf into her soul, and she heard it whispering to her all the time. She still hears it. Its words are savage, and it hates you, and it wants to consume everything she comes near. It can take over her body on the full moons. It made her into a slavering beast on the first one she endured. The memory of that night still makes her shudder.

“But every full moon since then, she has had her own mind. She still transforms, but the full moon is when the wolf goes silent, and the rest of the time she can control it. Do you know why, Harry?”

Harry gave a sulky little pull, trying to get out of Hawthorn’s embrace. She ignored him, indeed tightening her arms, and Harry was reminded that Remus, too, was much stronger than he looked when he wanted to be.

“Because a thirteen-year-old wizard—well, he’s fourteen, now—saw her when she was sweating in the terror of her first transformation, and offered to brew a potion for her that lets her keep her own mind.” Hawthorn’s voice was so soft that Harry could have mistaken it for Pansy’s; he had never realized before how much Pansy sounded like her mother. “He offered it on no other condition that she not ally with those who had hurt her, who were also his enemies. She gave him a
book as a gift in thanks, but there is no thanks enough for opening her eyes in the moonlight, and feeling her limbs shift and change, and the wolf in her mind fall silent instead of howling. When she speaks back to the moon, she does it as herself.”

Her embrace tightened again, and Harry found his face resting against warmth—her shoulder.

“If you never did anything else for me,” said Hawthorn, shifting the pronouns of the story just when Harry was least prepared to deal with it, “that would have been enough. It would be more than enough. You never need be afraid that I would think you weak, Harry. You saw me in my weakest hour, and you chose to give me back my strength. You never hesitated. Someone with that much compassion inside him is assured of more than allies. He is assured of friends, and deathless loyalty. Do not worry about weakening me, or anyone else who has allied with you. Lean on our strength when you must, and then stand and go on. There is no shame in this, ever.”

Harry felt as if he were drifting beyond speech or thought. Hawthorn sounded as if she were speaking the truth. And that meant that she really saw him as someone like that, someone strong and compassionate…

He began to cry, and couldn’t stop himself.

Hawthorn said nothing, simply holding him. Harry didn’t lower his arm, but she didn’t tell him to. She just murmured the same words over and over, and when Harry’s sobs quieted and the tears finished choking him, he could make out what they were. “You gave me back my strength. Thank you.”

Harry took a deep breath. He had wept, and he could believe, just, that Hawthorn did not think him weak or foolish for it. He began to draw back.

Hawthorn still didn’t move her arms, and then, with another sign of that strength that he kept forgetting she had, picked him up and off the ground.

“You’re already missing classes,” she said quietly. “And though I know that you have other needs, I think sleep is the most important one, now that you have shed your tears. You stink of exhaustion.” Her voice was gentle, so that Harry might hear that she was teasing.

“I was going to take a sleeping potion tonight,” Harry said, and could hear his words slurring. “But I have lessons that I’m teaching to other students this afternoon. I was going to—”

“No,” said Hawthorn calmly. “Pansy gave me the Slytherin password. I’m taking you back to your room. You’ll take the sleeping potion now, assuming you need it. I don’t think you will, not when you get a pillow behind your head.”

That was Harry’s fear, too. He pushed at Hawthorn, of course ineffectually. “I don’t want to fall asleep yet. I want—”

“What you want and what you need are two different things,” said Hawthorn, heading towards the steps down from the Owlery. “And what you need should win, I think.”

Harry fought. He had techniques for this. Lily had taught some to him, and some he’d learned by experience. He fought the relaxing in his muscles, the insidious warmth that was calling to him. He had lessons to teach. He thought he knew how to break through the block on Ron’s magic, if…

He started when he realized that the ghostly images of the lessons he’d been seeing on the backs of his eyelids were the precursors of dreams, and tried to jerk back awake. He couldn’t even open his eyes, though.

He felt something soft beneath his head, and someone rolled him over enough that he wasn’t lying on his arm. He murmured something about lessons and Connor, and then sleep hooked him and dragged him away like a Portkey.

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Harry awakened briefly. He blinked at the dark room, and the intense warmth curled around him. He realized he was in Draco’s arms. Draco had apparently decided to crawl into his bed and hold him without so much as a by-your-leave.

Harry realized that he could use more sleep, from the dust weighing his eyes down, but he had slept some hours, and that ought to be enough. He squirmed, and that woke Draco up.
“Go use the loo,” Draco whispered. “And then come back.”

Harry shook his head. “I wasn’t thinking about that—”

“Yes, I know,” said Draco, voice sharpening now as he looked into Harry’s eyes. “And it doesn’t matter. Did you know I fainted in Transfiguration, because I was picking up your exhaustion?” He sounded disgusted, but Harry didn’t know if it was with Harry or himself.

“I’m sorry—”

“Not enough anymore,” said Draco. “Damn it, Harry, this is going to stop. So go to the loo, if that’s what you need to do, and then come back here. It’s two in the morning. You still have seven hours before you need to wake up and watch your bloody prat of a brother survive the First Task. I’m sure that he will. Everything is going to be fine, since you’ve been training him.”

Harry hesitated for a long moment, weighing the pros and cons of staying awake right now in his mind. He could go out into the Forbidden Forest if he stayed awake now, perhaps.

And in the morning, he would have to deal with an angry Draco, whom apologies weren’t enough to content any more, and he would still have to watch Connor face the dragons, and Millicent and Blaise and Pansy would doubtless yell at him, and he would still attract unwanted attention from the other Slytherins.

And he would lose the warmth and languor pulling at his muscles now.

He bowed his head, padded into the loo, brushed his teeth, and relieved himself. He avoided looking into the mirror.

Then he came back and curled up next to Draco, who immediately moved over to him and slung an arm over his side. Harry pressed closer to the warmth despite himself and closed his eyes. It’s all right, he reassured himself. Draco won’t tell anyone about this. No one else can see.

“Good night, Harry,” Draco whispered, stroking his forehead.

Harry let out a deep sigh, and, for the first time in far too many days, relaxed.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Three: Wildest of Them All

He had been right the first time, Draco thought, once he was awake enough to think coherently. This had to stop.

He looked down at Harry, who was still curled up on his side, his breathing deep and relaxed. Peaceful, Draco thought. He traced one finger over Harry’s forehead, lightly enough that he wouldn’t wake him, and found no trace of blood on the scar. There was no pain in his own brow, either, but he was no longer sure that he trusted that part of his empathy. There were nights where he felt no agony, and yet Harry still had dark circles under his eyes in the morning.

Of course, now I know he probably wasn’t sleeping at all.

The thought made Draco narrow his eyes. There were many things that had to stop, really. That was only the most obvious of them—Harry’s staying up until all hours because he was utterly convinced that his duties for other people needed to be accomplished immediately. But since it was the most obvious, Draco intended to make sure that it stopped, whether or not Harry was enthusiastic about the idea.

The rest…

You might as well admit it to yourself, you know. You can have all the arguments with him you like, storm around in high dudgeon, hint and yell at him until you go blue in the face. He’s never going to realize that you’re in love with him until you flat out tell him, honestly, like a Gryffindor.

Draco shuddered. He tried to convince himself that it was all disgust, that it came from the thought of acting like a
He knew well enough that that wasn’t true.

He was nervous. Oh, he knew that Harry cared for him, and was his best friend. He didn’t know that Harry was in love with him, and every instinct he had, every Slytherin instinct, screamed at him not to betray himself until he was assured of some equal emotion in return. It would hurt too much to see Harry’s eyes cloud over, and hear Harry’s voice tell him gently that he was incapable of returning the feeling.

And it’s not even that, Draco thought, able to approach the truth, here in the warm bed in early morning, that he’d been denying to himself and ignoring all week. I think Harry could date me, sure. But he’d do it because that’s what I wanted. He values me like he values other people, as someone with a soul he never wants to damage and freedom he immensely respects.

He doesn’t value me more.

And that’s not enough.

I’m never going to be another of his sacrifices. I won’t accept any gift he offers me that I can’t return. And I won’t offer him anything he can’t return, either.

Draco laid his head back down on the pillow and closed his eyes, adjusting his arm so that it held Harry more tightly. He could feel Harry, unselfconscious as he only was when asleep, let out a little sigh and move closer to the source of warmth and pleasure. That was another problem, Draco thought, though not as severe as the fact that Harry only held him as important in the way the rest of the world was. When he was awake, Harry seemed to consciously recoil from pleasure of any kind. He took comfort only when he was utterly broken down, and every other touch he offered was a means of giving it.

I don’t know how I can overcome that. Even empathy only tells me what he’s feeling, not how to make him feel better.

Draco bit the side of his mouth. The books he’d been reading on empathy had defined it further and further from him—unsurprisingly, since it was never something he’d cared to look up before he was cursed with it. They’d made it clear that empathy wasn’t just a fool’s or a sop’s gift, that he was not the helpless bearer of emotions from the wide world. He could choose to tune his empathy to one particular person, and in fact, the books suggested, that would act as a shield against the random dumping of feelings from the masses.

Harry’s emotions were sharp and strong, and Draco cared about him. He was the obvious choice.

That was the reason he felt the physical pain from Harry’s scar, and why he’d fainted in Transfiguration yesterday from the pain and fatigue he could sense pouring through their link—not from the stress of not knowing where Harry was, which Blaise had taunted him with. He could break the link, if he wanted, but he didn’t think he’d be able to. He had to really desire to do that. He didn’t.

And that’s what it came down to, in the end, the unanswerable answer to all the other objections his mind and common sense might raise to being with Harry.

I can’t back away from him. I can’t love someone else the way I love him. No matter what the problems to being in love with him are, I’m backed against a wall, and I’ll just have to find solutions to the problems.

This helplessness has got to stop, too.

Even though he hadn’t found answers, only made a decision, Draco felt sleep creeping back in to claim him. It was still an hour until they had to be up, eat breakfast, and watch the First Task. Harry needed the sleep, and Draco needed to be here, far more than anything else at the moment.

He closed his eyes, and let himself sink into golden-green warmth.

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Harry kept his head ducked as he picked at his breakfast. He hadn’t really dared to look anyone in the eye since he came to the Slytherin table. He knew, just from sidelong glances, that most of them knew about Hawthorn carrying him to the
common room, and so about his breakdown.

He was embarrassed beyond measure to have showed weakness like that.

_Hawthorn said it wasn’t weakness_, the voice that sounded like Snape in his head reminded him, but hers was one assurance against an army of gazes. Harry couldn’t control how everyone else reacted, and if they were watching him and reporting back to their parents as he now knew some of them did, then they might report things that could put his allies in danger.

_Damn it._

“Harry.”

Harry started and glanced up, only to find himself in a small pen of his yearmates. Draco leaned close on his left, Millicent on his right, and Pansy stood behind him. Vince and Blaise sat on the outskirts. Vince looked mostly interested in his plate, but Blaise was watching Harry with palpable curiosity.

“What?” he whispered.

“You remember what I said to you last night,” Draco murmured, “about this stopping? That it had to stop?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t want to skip as much sleep as I did again,” _I’ve learned the consequences of that_. “I can promise you. I might need reminders sometimes about when to go to bed, but that won’t happen again.”

Draco cocked his head. “That’s a start, but not all of it. Although I’m pleased that you’ve learned at least that lesson.” His eyes flicked over Harry’s head, and Harry suspected that he’d felt a stir in Millicent’s emotions. “You had something to say?”

Harry turned expectantly to meet her eyes. Millicent looked startled for the briefest of seconds, before she shrugged and picked up the chance that Draco had handed her.

“Yes, I did,” she said, eyes on Harry. “I know that the formal alliance you made with our families runs both ways. However, you’re in more need of protection right now than we are. The fact that you’re in more danger has something to do with that, as well as the fact that our families will come to our aid if we call, and yours…won’t.”

Harry nodded, grateful that she’d put it so delicately. “What are you suggesting?”

“You were already doing that,” said Millicent. “You’ve granted our requests. It’s time that we granted you something. That’s going to be protection, and help, and anything else that we can do.”

“Stop worrying so much about your obligations to us,” said Millicent. “You’ve granted our requests. It’s time that we granted you something. That’s going to be protection, and help, and anything else that we can do.”

“You were already doing that,” Harry protested, trying to understand why what Millicent proposed was any different from what had been going on. “You tell your parents what I’m doing, and—”

“No,” said Pansy. Harry turned and blinked at her. “I haven’t written a letter to Mother about you in a week, Harry,” she said softly. “She showed up here yesterday on her own. Something about concern and your being better at resisting an attack you knew was coming than one you didn’t.”

Harry snorted lightly. “I can believe that. But what are you proposing, then?”

“No more letters home about you, as long as something drastic doesn’t happen,” said Millicent. “If you get critically wounded or we think enemies are hunting you, then yes, of course, our parents should know about it. But we’ll refrain from reporting on your every small movement. It only stresses you, and it distracts us from helping you more concretely. Besides, we don’t need to do it if you really are going to make an effort to sleep and eat properly.” She sounded mildly exasperated.

Harry stared at her.

“We’ll help you, instead,” said Millicent quietly. “And that’s the real reason we’re not going to act like minders and spies anymore, but like allies and friends. You’re going to be our leader, Harry. We should at least get used to following you.”

“Wait a minute—” Harry began, no longer thinking the new bargain was better than the old.
“That’s what we’re doing,” said Draco. “We’re going to treat you like an equal, Harry, and we expect you to do the same with us. For example, tell us if something is bothering you so badly that you can’t sleep. Offer us the chance to help with any tasks that you might have lying around and want someone else to pick up. That kind of thing.” He lifted his head and stared calmly back at Harry. “We discussed this yesterday. We think it’s best. Our parents are perceptive and intelligent and dedicated to helping you, but we’re the ones who’re around you day by day and can see what’s happening to you more quickly. Besides, this old way isn’t working, just like Millicent said. We’ll try it new, because, one way or another, your daily suffering is going to stop.”

Harry swallowed. He would be a fool to reject this offer, and not because it would probably increase the other Slytherins’ watchful surveillance.

Equality. They know it’s important to me.

He couldn’t refuse a relationship that might protect them and at the same time give them equal standing and freedom. They spoke of being followers, but let them once get a taste of what real freedom and independence were like, and he thought they probably would not go back.

Slowly, he nodded. “All right, then,” he said. He managed to produce a smile. “I can’t think of anything that I want done today, except holding my hand while Connor passes the First Task,” he added lightly.

Draco grabbed his hand at once, and then glared at everyone else. Harry rolled his eyes. Merlin knows why he likes touching me so much. At least he isn’t going to be completely overprotective about me this time.

He went back to eating his breakfast. It took him until the middle of the meal to realize what the strange feeling in the center of his chest was.

He was free from a source of tension he hadn’t known was there. He was very nearly happy.

******

“Welcome, professors, students, and judges, to the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament!”

Harry settled back in his seat and looked around the enclosure that had been created to hold the Task. The seats ringed it, as the stands did the Quidditch Pitch, and heavy wards glittered in front of them, protecting the actual grass of the enclosure from interference by spell. A small tent stood at the southern end of the enclosure. Viktor, Fleur, and Connor were in it now, Harry knew, preparing for the Task. He had caught his brother’s eyes as they left the Great Hall this morning, and wished him a silent good hunting, but he hadn’t actually got the chance to say anything to him. Nor had he seen him since.

Dumbledore stood in the stands on the opposite side of the enclosure, where most of the Hogwarts professors were seated, speaking with his voice enhanced with Sonorus. Harry didn’t think it was coincidence that the Slytherins had brought him to sit in the stands facing Dumbledore. He wasn’t sure what it meant that most of Slytherin House had come with them, though.

His gaze swept slowly past the stands on the eastern and western sides, and settled on what he hadn’t wanted to look at. The dragons.

There were three of them, all nesting mothers, crouched possessively over their eggs. A narrow corridor of wards led down the center of the enclosure, cutting the pen into thirds and offering restricted access to each dragon. Harry knew that each Champion would face only one dragon, and his nightmares of Connor having to defeat all three could be laid to rest.

Nonetheless, he could not regard the dragons with an easy eye. There were a Welsh Green, a Chinese Fireball, and a Hungarian Horntail waiting on the nests, now and then shifting so that the golden gleam of the false egg the Champions were supposed to retrieve could be seen. They might be distant, and the wards softened the outlines of their bodies and dimmed their roars, but they were still dragons, undeniably.

It didn’t help that Harry had been feeling something like a wind in his mind since he had arrived in the enclosure, the same kind of sensation he felt around Connor’s compulsion. But this wasn’t compulsion. This was a distant roaring sound, like a storm, and it was coming from the dragons.
Harry shivered, and tried to turn his eyes to the tent. Dumbledore was saying something now about the first Champion emerging. He wondered if it would be Connor, and clenched his sweating palms together sharply.

“Ouch,” Draco said.

Harry started. He’d forgotten that Draco was sitting beside him, never mind that the other boy had one of his hands clasped inside Harry’s. The clench was putting a lot of pressure on his fingers. Harry opened his cramped fists. “Sorry,” he breathed.

Draco shook his head, his eyes bright as he watched Harry. Harry frowned at him. *What is it with him lately? Anyone would think he was pleased that I’d half-crushed his bloody hand.*

The tent stirred, and Viktor Krum stepped out. The cheering from the Durmstrang students, most of them seated around the Slytherins, increased noticeably. Viktor, moving steadily towards the Chinese Fireball dragon, didn’t seem to notice, though he did tilt his head slightly in acknowledgment.

Harry had expected Viktor to look awkward on the ground, as many large Seekers did, but he handled himself with both grace and speed as he made his way towards the dragon. His wand was in his hand, his face set in a ferocious scowl. Harry was reluctantly impressed. He didn’t think that Viktor regarded the danger he was in, or saw anything but the completion of his task.

The Chinese Fireball snarled and crouched over her eggs as Viktor came near. Harry found his gaze skimming past the Champion and settling on her again. Her scales shone violently scarlet, the same color as the scales he’d used for his disastrous potion that summer—as they should have, since liondragon was only another name for the Fireball. A fringe of golden spikes around her face lifted and lowered with her snarls. Eggs in the Gryffindor colors showed between her talons as they shifted.

Harry was still staring when the dragon slewed her head around, drawing in her breath as she prepared to flame, and Harry caught a glimpse of her eyes.

The roaring of the storm in his head increased. He abruptly felt another mind moving in concert with his, though unaware of it, rolling into his thoughts like an ocean consuming a stream. That mind was almost intolerably vast, and wild, and filled with something better than intelligence. That mind knew wind and flame and stone, and if it did not know water, that was a small loss. It—

Harry tore himself free with a gasp as the Chinese Fireball abruptly shook her head and cried out in pain. She’d barely had time to start her mushroom-shaped cloud of fire before Viktor’s Conjunctivitis Curse hit her. Harry watched, his heart in his throat, as she went into convulsions, her long, elegant scarlet body whipping back and forth as Viktor dodged past her, swift and graceful still, and snatched up the golden egg. He was out beyond her reach in a moment, and the stands were exploding with shouts of his name and cries of congratulations.

Harry’s eyes were on the dragon; he didn’t seem able to look away. He felt small, sharp tinges of pain in his own skin as the Fireball smashed her own eggs, and then reared up on her haunches and pawed furiously at her eyes. He bowed his head, shivering. He was glad that Viktor had survived, of course—he would not have wanted to see someone die in the First Task, or in any of the Tasks—but part of him was still bound to the dragon, hurting as she hurt.

“Harry?”

Draco’s hand on his brought him back. Harry nodded and snatched his head up, gasping out air and then breathing it in again, trying to remind himself that he had a human chest and human lungs. He couldn’t breathe fire. And he had a human voice, too, in which he whispered, “I’m all right,” as the Chinese Fireball crouched over the smashed remains of her eggs and trumpeted her loss.

Harry could hear the judges discussing the matter. In the end, while Viktor received a passable score, he had points removed for the loss of the eggs.

*He shouldn’t get any points at all,* Harry thought, his mind unexpectedly quick and turning, vicious, and then he let out a sharp breath and buried his head in his hands.

*What is happening to me? The presence of any other Dark creature has never affected me like this.*
He did remember what Dobby had said about dragons being the wildest of all magical creatures, but that didn’t mean they should be affecting him like this. He swallowed and turned back to the tent as Fleur emerged, walking towards her dragon, the Welsh Green. He was watching the Task. He was not mourning, with fierce heat and mounting flame, the loss of so many young lives in the smashed eggs.

Draco kept on stroking his hand as Fleur faced the Green, and Harry settled further into his own thoughts. He had no reason to have that same kind of reaction to this dragon. Perhaps the reaction to the Fireball was because it was the first dragon he’d seen in action, Harry reassured himself. It was just the surprise and shock of it all. He was used to it now.

That theory held right up until Fleur, trying to draw the dragon’s attention with a flirt of her silver hair, danced towards the western side of the enclosure, where Harry sat. The dragon, as brilliantly green as the Fireball had been scarlet, tracked her movements, and her eyes swept over Harry.

Harry found himself standing on the shore of another enormous mind, this one sharper and stronger than the Fireball, not as nervous, but more vicious. Thoughts rose and fell like waves. There were the eggs behind her, under her, to be protected, but more than that, there was the enemy. A few moments more, and she would be in the perfect position to breathe fire at.

Fleur moved.

The Welsh Green breathed.

Harry opened his own eyes in time to see the narrow jet just barely miss Fleur’s face, setting her robes alight, but at the same time, he was feeling heat churn in his belly, flex up his throat, and blast out in front of him. He was seeing the world glittering in a hundred shades that had no names, and everywhere were smaller things than he was, deserving of no respect, and there were the eggs, and he would stamp on this annoying small thing if there was no other way to get rid of it…

The Welsh Green stamped down a talon, lunging off her nest as she did so. Once again, Fleur was too quick.

And this time, she began to sing.

Harry felt the immense mind in front of him begin to frost over, the wildness subsiding as it listened to the song, like the mother’s cradle-song. The Welsh Green half-slumped, brilliant eyes shutting, and the spell somewhat broke. Harry closed his eyes, and kept them shut, even when the roar of approbation told him that Fleur had succeeded in snatching her egg.

“Harry?” That was Millicent this time. “If you need more sleep, or if you don’t think that you can watch your brother, then we’ll take you back to bed.”

“No,” Harry said, forcing his eyes open. Connor. Connor is next. “I—something about the dragons is affecting me. I don’t know what.”


“What?” Harry blinked at her over his shoulder, glad to have the excuse to look away from the dragons. The Welsh Green was waking up now, and her rage at finding one of her eggs was gone knew no bounds.

“It’s the reason that my mother decided not to come today.” Pansy’s eyes met his, filled with a knowledge that she didn’t look like she enjoyed having. “Dragons are so wild that sometimes their minds reach out and touch the minds of wizards who have a certain susceptibility to wildness themselves. She knew the wolf in her would answer the dragons, and she had no mind to transform in front of an audience, which might happen this close to the full moon.” Pansy wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. “I didn’t know they would affect you like this, though.”

“Neither did I,” said Harry, remembering what else Dobby had said. The dragons were wild, but they were not free.

 Apparently their wildness was enough to let them affect the thoughts of a vates, though.

Harry shuddered, and then his brother stepped out of the tent and made his way down the third corridor towards the Hungarian Horntail.
Harry found that his gaze couldn’t leave Connor. His brother had always dealt better with situations in progress than situations he had to anticipate and plan for. And now that he had a plan, he looked perfectly content. He walked with his head up, now and then glancing at the stands. Harry would have waved, but he didn’t think Connor could see him, and he thought the motion would be jerky and stiff anyway, more apt to make Connor think Harry was choking to death than wishing him good luck.

Connor drew his wand when he was still a good distance from his dragon, to Harry’s relief, and cast. “Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare!” Then he repeated it again, and again, and again, even as the first copy faded into being in front of him.

Harry felt a familiar sensation of wind a moment later. Connor’s compulsion reached out and grasped the illusions, and they began to run in several different directions, one of them cutting to the left, two to the right, and another sliding in on his belly as though he were going to roll right under the dragon’s legs and grab the golden shell. Harry had lost track of his brother in the mess of them.

The dragon roared.

Harry shuddered, and was abruptly inside her head, feeling the heavy tug and lift and shift of wings on her shoulders, the weight of horns on her head, the pressure of flame and wind in her mouth. The eggs, the eggs were beneath her, and so much information came from so many different directions that she could not locate the small thing, and there—

She snapped her jaws down. Harry felt his own terror tear him away from his intense identification with her for a moment, and then he was pulled back in as Connor’s duplicate faded out of existence. It hadn’t been him.

She turned her head in slow circles, backing and stamping, her feet falling in delicate patterns that of course wouldn’t crush any of her children. She was irritated, and so the small enemy would die. There was nothing more to it than that. Things which irritated her died, most often by burning.

She smelled one of the many small enemies coming up on her left side, and she whipped her head around and breathed, the flame striking and bouncing from the magic around her. Another two images faded.

Then she felt pressure, tickling pressure, against her belly. She flicked her tail around and gathered herself, prepared to reach down and secure her eggs the moment she determined what it was.

More duplicates erupted from beneath her belly, scuttling like nesting ants. One of them grabbed at her eggs, and she screamed and lifted her wings, propelling herself into a hovering rear that would protect her children from any imaginable enemy.

Many, many small enemies running in circles. She would kill them all. She took a deep breath, and snapped her head around in a circle, flaming across the ground. The grass caught on fire. Her eggs, of course, used to heat, merely baked and soaked it in, rather than being destroyed.

One of the images rolled over and over, just under the flame, clutching the golden egg close to its chest, and then it was over and under and across the grass, and away, and she had lost a child.

Harry returned abruptly to himself as someone shook his shoulders and slapped his face. He gasped, sitting bolt upright, and blinked around. He saw Connor at the far end of the enclosure again, and heard the cheers, and knew that his brother was safe and had succeeded.

“She’ve got to get you out of here,” Pansy was saying worriedly. “I don’t know how you can keep your mind around the dragons when they start using the spells to confine them and transport them.”

Harry nodded and stood. He would congratulate Connor later. What mattered now was that his brother had survived, more than that he had won.

Then he felt a wind surge past his ears, and it carried the sound of freedom with it, whispered in a simple word from one of the small ones: Imperio.

Harry turned sharply. The Hungarian Horntail was rearing, and he could feel her mind contained neatly in the chains of the Imperius Curse, directed and given a cunning and intelligence she would not have achieved on her own. She turned broadside
to the wards and pressed her hide against them, the hide that protected dragons from most magical forms of attack.

The wards snapped, and then fell, opening up the three lanes and permitting the dragons to catch sound and scent of each other.

And then the wards around the enclosure fell with a crash and sparkling cascade of magic, and the dragons could see the audience. Harry could feel the moment when the Fireball’s and the Green’s seething hatred turned to decision, the decision that the Imperius-controlled Horntail had already come to. There were many small things around them. They could kill and feast and take vengeance for the loss of their children.

The Horntail spread her wings and breathed, her flame shooting towards the western stands where a large group of Ravenclaw students sat.

Harry was on his feet almost before he realized what was happening. “Protego!”

The Shield Charm had to be enormous to protect all the students involved, but it had Harry’s will behind it, and his desperation. The flame splattered out in a shining flower against the shield. The dragon screamed her displeasure, and then she was aloft, circling, her shadow blotting out the sun, her neck lowered and her throat already flexing with the next jet of flame.

The Welsh Green joined her in the air a moment later, roaring hungrily, and the Chinese Fireball turned with frightening speed and power, on foot, towards the eastern set of stands. Adult wizards were hurling spells now, but most of them bounced without effect from the dragons’ hides, and they were hindered by the need to protect several hundred running, screaming, crying students.

Harry slammed a hand onto Draco’s shoulder. “This is where I need your help,” he said, lifting his voice to be heard over the screaming and the roaring. “I know what I’m going to do. Your job is the protect the people around you—get the other people who’ve had lessons with me to help you—while not hurting the dragons.”

Draco blinked at him in disbelief. “Not hurt the dragons? Why?”

Harry smiled. He knew it was a horrid smile, more like the rictus of a corpse. “Because,” he said, “I’m going to need all my wit and power to defeat them, and I can feel it when they’re hurt. Accio Firebolt!”

The Summoning Charm worked rather like a slingshot, given how desperate he was, snatching up the broom Draco had given him for his birthday and hurling it to him. Harry flung a leg over it and kicked off before anyone could say or do anything to stop him. He felt the wind in his hair and the familiar exaltation rising, which was good. It was something to keep him anchored in his own body as he swept towards the dragons and felt the pressure of three mighty minds.

First to draw their attention.

He spun under the Horntail’s belly, the flight of something else in the air with her drawing even her Imperius-controlled eyes, and then dived towards her nest. For a moment, his vision was filled with scales, his nostrils with the stink of dragon-hide and fire, and then he was past again and spiraling down in a long stretch of light and dark straight towards the cement-colored eggs.

Not even an Unforgivable Curse could control a mother dragon’s protectiveness of her eggs. The Horntail turned back towards him, free of the spell, screaming, and then she was flying fast, right behind him, the wind from her wings hard and wild enough to blow his broom off-course.

Harry turned his broom upside-down and put on another burst of speed, avoiding both the maddened Horntail’s claws and the whip-like tail of the Welsh Green, who’d turned towards him when he soared over her nest. Their minds attacked him, the sensations of hunger and hunting and killing and righteous anger slicing through his thoughts right at the same time as he needed to perform a complicated double roll maneuver.

Harry closed his eyes and let his mind deal with the attack while his body dealt with the flying. Dive and loop and turn and roll and roll, and then he was past and up again, rising like a hawk from the nests, with the Horntail right behind him, tail tucking primly up against her belly so she wouldn’t damage her own eggs.
The Welsh Green was in the air and swerving towards him now, drawn by his flying or his contact with her mind or his magic. And Harry could feel the Chinese Fireball turning, too, intent on finding out what had caused the disturbance in the others. A moment of beating wings and nervous scraping at the ground, and then she was aloft.

*Great. I have their attention.*

*Now I just need to figure out what the hell I'm going to do with it.*

******

Draco knew when he could argue with Harry, and now wasn’t one of those times. Determination, hard as dragon-hide, had pushed at Draco like a wall when Harry had spoken of what he wanted them to do. And it was true that he couldn’t have followed, anyway, since the charms put on the Firebolt would only allow Harry to fly it.

That didn’t mean he didn’t turn to the other Slytherins with a hard pounding in his ears.

“Pansy,” he said, “carry the word to the other people who’ve been attending lessons with him.”

Pansy gave him an eloquent, confused look. There were people milling everywhere around them, uncertain which direction to run. *In all this?* her eyes said for her, with no need to state it aloud.

“You’re a witch, for Merlin’s sake,” Draco hissed at her, and then turned to Millicent. “You know what he’s been teaching in those lessons?”

“I do,” said Millicent. “I came along and listened sometimes. Cast a Disillusionment Charm on myself so no one would be too particular about me being there. I think I know how to confuse a dragon.” She held out her wand. “*Speculum Ardoris!*”

A shield of flames spurted out of her wand and shot towards the red dragon; Draco thought it was a Chinese Fireball, though he wasn’t sure. The flames curled around the dragon’s face, obscuring it from view, and an annoyed roar came from it. Draco swallowed. It would have to work. A dragon wouldn’t be hurt by fire. The dragon really was only irritated, not hurt, and Harry wouldn’t fall from his broom like a bundle of limp rags at any moment.

Other people seemed to have the same idea. Cries of “*Speculum Ardoris!*” rose from other places in the stands, and Draco breathed easier when he saw the small, brave, insane figure still on his broom, dodging sweep after sweep of claws and tails and jets of flame.

Draco took a deep breath and began to concentrate, hard, on the strongest protection spell he knew. He had to protect; he didn’t know all the spells that Harry had been teaching the other students, and Pansy had finally thought to cast *Sonorus* so she could shout at people, and he was feeling emotions sweeping over him like a tide, now that Harry was no longer right next to him.

The strongest protection spell he knew happened to be Dark Arts, taught to him by his father just before he left for Hogwarts, in case he encountered more enemies there than he thought.

*Too bad. People will live with it.*

“*Defensor vindictae!*”

Waves of black coolness spread out around Draco, inundating the stands and freezing the stupid students who couldn’t do anything but run and scream in place. He opened his eyes. Since he was the source of the spell, he could see above it and the dark blanket it cast, and see the form it assumed.

Immense eyes opened in the blanket near the end of the stands, and looked at Draco. Draco nodded, and managed to lift his hands through the mist and clasp them in front of him.

Fists surged up just beneath the eyes. Let one of the dragons, or another hostile force, try to attack those under the Dark spell, and it would pummel them, presumably to death. Draco didn’t know, since his father had only permitted him to try out the spell with non-lethal force behind it.
Not this time. This time, he was going to defend people, both for his own sake and because Harry had asked him to.

_Harry._

Draco’s eyes went back to the sky, where one of the pieces of his life rode his broom in a death-defying dance, and felt his stomach contract. He wanted to be sick, but instead, he stood prepared to defend. Because Harry had asked him to.

_Please, you stupid prat, come back alive to see how well I listened._

******

Hermione wondered why she was the one who had to think of everything. *Speculum Ardoris* could only do so much, and the Dark Arts spell Malfoy had used only reached across half the stands, and Parkinson was shouting her head off about not harming the dragons, and Harry, the brave, stupid idiot, was circling on high with three incredibly dangerous Dark creatures after him. They might not be able to hurt the dragons, but they had to insure Harry survived long enough to do whatever it was that he wanted to do.

It wasn’t that she minded thinking of everything, so much. It would just be nice if other people could assume the burden, too.

She raised her wand, carefully focused on the Hungarian Horntail, who was closest to Harry, and whispered the same spell that she’d heard Connor use when he faced that dragon.

In a moment, there were two copies of Harry in the air, and then three, as she whispered the spell again, and then four. Hermione could feel herself sweating as she concentrated on holding the images steady. It was harder than she’d expected, doing it from this distance, and controlling so many at once.

But she was a powerful witch. She could do this. She hadn’t needed any soppy pureblood ritual to do it, either. She only needed her will and her magic, and she already knew she was a match for most of the purebloods in the school.

The Horntail roared in irritation, and left off chasing the real Harry to swat at one of the images. The Welsh Green was getting into the action, too, clamping her teeth down and screeching as the image melted into thin air. Hermione smiled, but she was getting dangerously tired, and she didn’t think—

_“Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare.”_

Hermione nearly sagged in relief as someone else whispered the spell, and then an arm curled around her shoulders, supporting her. She didn’t even mind that much when she looked up and saw it was Zacharias Smith. Smith wasn’t really all that bad, once you got used to him and his more annoying ways.

“I can’t believe no one else is doing anything to help him,” she said.

“Well, the professors are protecting the students on this side,” Zacharias said in his cool drawl. “I suspect they thought that was more important than just one student, no matter how powerful.”

Hermione scowled at him. “Yes, but none of the other students are doing this, either!”

“Perils of being the smartest, Hermione,” said Zacharias, calling her by her first name for one of the few times she could remember. “You get to do all the other work that other people can’t even think of. *Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare.***

Hermione fixed her gaze on Harry again and repeated the spell, deciding she was recovered enough to do it now. She would never share, ever, how much Zacharias’s words had warmed her.

******

Harry was grateful for the images that appeared suddenly around him, and for the protective magic he could feel at his back, and the Flame Mirror spells dodging through the air. Grateful, but he didn’t know what to do with the time they were buying him. All the dragons were very much focused on him; he could, if he concentrated a bit, get images of himself through three pairs of eyes.
You have a connection to their minds. Use it.

That was the problem, though, Harry thought, as he looped around the Welsh Green’s latest attempt to bring him down with fire. The other magical creatures he knew wore webs. He did not know how to free these dragons when they wore none.

But they are wild and not free. They must be bound somehow. What way could they be bound that’s outside wards and the spells they were using to confine them in those pens?

Harry concentrated on that, dodging quick little jabs into their minds, trying to figure out the high-strung nervousness of the Chinese Fireball, the cool viciousness of the Welsh Green, the anger of the Hungarian Horntail, and how he could use that to his advantage without falling off his broom if he tried.

He felt what he thought he had to do in a moment. There were boundaries, after all. If the dragons’ minds were oceans or lakes, there were still the shores at the edges of them, those things their thoughts would not cross or contain. He wondered what lay beyond them, behind them, what kind of freedom the dragons would manage if they could think beyond their wildness for a moment.

He took a deep breath and pulled up, hovering, on his broom.

The Horntail loomed in front of him, her front legs lifted, her claws spread wide, her head turned broadside to him. Her gleaming eye caught and held his, and Harry let himself be swept as on the wind of Legilimency, or the wind that had borne him through the darkened gate on Walpurgis Night, into her mind.

He brought with him the music he had heard when he circled on the thestral’s back above the Forbidden Forest, and he unleashed it into the Horntail’s mind, filling her thoughts with a booming chorus that focused on freedom and joy rather than the ravenous anger and hunger and mother-terror that had ridden her.

He slipped through her thoughts, rose on the shore of her ocean-like mind, and then crashed beyond it. The Horntail was listening to music she had long forgotten, or not thought about, since they had brought her to Hogwarts. There were bindings on her after all, though they had come from her own nature and not from any spells that the Dragon Keepers had cast. Prodded into despair and fury over her nest, she had forgotten there might be more to life than the immediate moment. That was the surest way for wizards to make dragons forget themselves so they could control them: just stir up their emotions, and they forgot about freedom.

Harry slipped out and through the other side, and opened his eyes to find himself on his broom again, unconsumed by flame.

The Hungarian Horntail began to sing.

Harry cried out at the sweetness of it, bringing up a hand in front of his face as though to shield his eyes from a physical attack. His scar was tingling and burning, the way it had when the thestral licked the blood off it. The music blew past him, storm after storm of notes, soaring crescendos of sound. It was wild, yes, but it was also free, and the dragon had remembered that she could do things, be things, as well as oppose them.

She dipped her wings and flew around him, in a dizzying pattern that Harry vaguely recognized as an infinity symbol, centered on his broom. He could not draw his eyes from her long enough to confirm the pattern, though. The Horntail was blazing, as though the song she were singing had turned to light, and it edged her scales with burning glory, like the sun flooding through a stained glass window.

The voices of the Welsh Green and the Chinese Fireball rose a moment later, as though in response, and now Harry could feel their music joining with the immense currents of other music that ran just out of hearing, always rising from the Forbidden Forest. The Dark creatures did not cease to exist when the Light came, after all. The stars still shone when the sun had risen.

A dip and a sweep of tail and claws and limbs, all more impossibly graceful than before, and then the Horntail was hovering in front of him. Harry met her eyes, and found them consuming, as they had always been, but this time he plunged into freedom, and something better than freedom.

The dragons were elevated again to the position of calm joy that they should have occupied. They did not need to hurt anyone else, because that sort of killing, mindless destruction was beneath them. They would take their eggs and go home, and there
would be no more hurting.

The Horntail exhaled. Flame whirled out from her nostrils, but parted to either side of Harry, so that his broom did not become a Firebolt in truth. Harry felt it lick at his skin, but the touch was gentle, making him think of the warmth he recalled waking up to with Draco that morning, rather than the scorching, vicious pain he’d had every right to expect.

*She’s saying thank you.*

The Horntail turned and stooped towards her nest, snapping up the corners of it in her claws. She hauled it easily off the ground, and then turned and soared east, into the brightening air. The Welsh Green and the Chinese Fireball dived, gathered up their eggs, and followed her, though the Welsh Green parted from the other two after a few moments of flying side by side. Harry watched her wheel west, and heard her voice reach back to him, a calling down of glory from above. The Fireball’s song was softer, still hesitant, but full and rich and wonderful nonetheless.

Harry hovered on his broom and watched them until they were both out of sight. His heart hurt in his chest, and he could hear the music vibrating and crooning in his ears, tugging and tempting and calling.

It was no use. He still couldn’t give himself to it.

Harry took a deep breath and headed towards the ground. He suspected that he would have a lot of explaining to do.

And he wanted some explanations of his own. Who had cast the Imperio, for example, and whether anyone was hurt.

******

Draco lifted the protection spell once the dragons were gone. That was partially so that he could avoid being questioned—much—about it, and partially so that he could get to Harry faster.

Harry landed not too far from the stands, and for a moment looked as though he couldn’t get his hands to let go of his broom. Then he did, with an effort and a little surprised noise. He lifted his head, blinking, and his eyes sought out Draco.

Draco would always remember that. *He* was the one Harry looked to first, and part of him preened and gloried and rejoiced in the knowledge.

He smiled slowly, letting Harry know that he wasn’t angry, at least for right now. Harry’s shoulders sagged in visible relief.

Then Draco was out of the stands, and laying one hand on Harry’s shoulder, and he was bathed in welcome weariness (like sand) and satisfaction (sweet candy on his lips) and more determination (like a stone wall). He murmured, because he could not speak of what was really rushing through his soul, “What maddened the dragons?”

“Someone cast the Imperius Curse,” Harry breathed, and then laughed abruptly and sagged against Draco. “And now the sleep’s all been undone, because I’m just as tired as I ever was.”

Draco could tell that wasn’t true. He rubbed one hand on the back of Harry’s head, anyway, noticing that his scar was a more brilliant red than normal, but not bleeding—

At least, he looked at Harry until a sharp jet of fear summoned his attention. He turned his head, sharply, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the stands where most of the professors had sat. It felt as though it had come from there, which made no sense. Why was someone afraid now, and that strongly?

Dumbledore was watching Harry with a disappointed look on his face, McGonagall with a fiercely proud one. Moody was scowling at him, looking as displeased at ever—though that could be with Draco, and his display of Dark Arts.

Draco shook off the idea that he could find out who had been afraid right now, and cuddled closer to Harry as other people began to arrive. He knew where he most wanted to be, and he was in that place right now. And Harry leaned on him without complaint, even shifting to follow Draco when he moved a bit, murmuring something about being warm and feeling safe.

*Those problems will most definitely be solved somehow, because there’s no way in hell I’m giving this up. Or him.*
Chapter Thirty-Four: Serpent’s Strike

“But what’s the matter?” Blaise asked innocently, waving the *Daily Prophet* in Harry’s face. “I would have thought you’d be pleased to see another article about you. Proves they haven’t got tired of you yet.”

Harry ground his teeth. If he could just respond calmly, or somehow banish the tide of blushing in his cheeks, then he could make Blaise stop teasing, he knew, but that was beyond him.

“It’s been more than a week,” he said, swallowing half his pumpkin juice at one gulp. Draco had to pound him on the back, and did so, more enthusiastically than was necessary. Harry shook his head when he could speak again. “You’d think they’d have forgotten about it by now.”

He became aware immediately that he was the object of pitying stares from several directions. He met Millicent’s eyes, and Pansy’s, and Draco’s, before he got tired of the game. “What?” he demanded.

“Potter,” Blaise drawled. “Do you really think that a child defeating three adult dragons is going to be forgotten that easily?”

“I didn’t defeat them, they flew off—”

“While the professors were doing nothing but standing around?” Blaise peeked at his paper. “Where is it—yes, there. ‘Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore seemed confused by Harry Potter’s presence in the air.’”

“They were defending the students—“

“And then you came back to the ground safely, after flying on your broom against *dragons*?” Blaise shook his head at him. “It’s such a dramatic story, Harry. Of course they’re going to love you.”

“Of course I came back unharmed.” Harry wanted to eat more of his toast, but he’d lost his appetite. He sighed and closed his eyes, massaging his forehead.

“Headache?” Millicent asked.

Harry peered at her, but she only looked sympathetic, not suspicious. “No,” he said. And it wasn’t, really. His scar hadn’t hurt much in the last week. *This* headache had more prosaic causes. “I just wish they’d give up and move on to something else.” He shook his head and stood. “Come on. McGonagall hasn’t forgiven me for missing Transfiguration last Friday yet.”

They’d just stood when Blaise, who was still looking at his paper, said, “Hello.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Didn’t you fight a witch named Umbridge?” Blaise asked, glancing at him in interest. “Says here that she’s been appointed Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

Harry felt his heart rate pick up. “That’s ridiculous,” he said to no one in particular. “She hated me because I was a Parselmouth. There’s no way that anyone would let her be in charge of the place where we’re supposed to go to register or be taken care of. There’s no way…” He shook his head, unable to think of the folly it would take for someone to appoint Umbridge there.

*On the other hand, this is the Ministry, after all. And not everyone in it is like Rufus Scrimgeour.*

“Doesn’t matter.” Blaise folded the paper with a careless shrug. “Sometimes Ministry politics are like that.”

“I know.” Harry didn’t speak the rest of what he was thinking aloud. If Umbridge was in a position where she could hurt magical creatures, that was a concern of his. He was *vates*. He had to think about this, and what it might mean for the future of magical creatures in Britain.

“Spill,” said Millicent.
Harry started slightly. “I was thinking about my allies,” he said, nevertheless. He had tried, whenever he wasn’t hiding around the corner from people who wanted to congratulate him on being a bloody hero, to be more open with the Slytherins, and explain what he worried about and why. “The centaurs and the rest of them. They aren’t going to fare well with a bitch like Umbridge in power.”

“You’re always thinking of the larger picture, aren’t you?” Millicent didn’t sound condemning, just thoughtful.

“He always is.”

That didn’t come from Blaise, from whom it would have been sarcasm, but from Draco. Harry turned around and looked at him in astonishment. He was taken further off guard by the open light he saw shining in Draco’s eyes, something like tenderness and something like pride.

*Why is he looking at me like that? I mean, I know he’s my friend, but friends don’t usually look at friends like that.*

Draco gave him a small smile, and said, “I take it that you want to do something about this, Harry.”

“I—yes.” Harry shook his head, and felt the Many snake stir on his arm. It was a welcome distraction from trying to figure out why the hell Draco had been looking at him like that when he hadn’t done anything to merit it. “Millicent, can you come with me to the Forbidden Forest this afternoon? I think I should find you an egg-shaped stone and introduce you to the centaurs.”

Millicent nodded, her face relaxing. “About time, Potter,” she said, but she didn’t sound annoyed with him.

“Attention, students.”

Harry turned around in irritation. They’d been close to getting out of the Great Hall, but more than that, Dumbledore’s announcements at breakfast had never been beneficial for him.

The Headmaster didn’t look in Harry’s direction, though, instead choosing to twinkle at the tables where the Durmstrang and the Beauxbatons students sat, and at the Gryffindor table.

“I would just like to remind everyone,” he said, projecting his voice easily over the Hall, “that the Yule Ball is coming up in a few weeks—a tradition that Hogwarts has always followed whenever the Triwizard Tournament has been held here. Students will be invited to the Great Hall for a night of dancing and celebration.” The smile on his face grew more pronounced. “The Ball is limited to students fourth year and up, unless younger students attend with an older partner. Dress robes are the required formal wear. Our Champions will lead the dancing. I suggest you find yourself partners soon, Mr. Krum, Miss Delacour, and Mr. Potter. Your various schools will be counting on you to make a good showing.”

*This isn’t the Second Task, is it?* Harry thought in panic for a moment, before relaxing and telling himself not to be stupid. He knew the schedule as well as anyone else. The Second Task wasn’t until February. He told himself to get over his paranoia, and moved towards the doors from the Great Hall, ignoring the other students’ excited buzz. He supposed that announcement hadn’t been *that* awful, though for all he knew it could have unforeseen awful consequences. All the others had.

“Excellent,” Blaise said in a tone of deep satisfaction.

Before Harry could ask him what he meant, Draco sniped, “Thinking about asking your little crush, Blaise?”

The other boy flushed slightly, but lifted his chin and said, “As a matter of fact, I think I will. I think it’s more than you’ll get up the courage to do, Draco, since you’ve just been going around moping and brooding and thinking yours will never talk to you.” He turned and walked out of the Great Hall with a smart stride.

“You could just talk to your crush, you know,” said Harry, grabbing Draco’s arm so that he couldn’t hex Blaise in the back. “I know you don’t want to, that you’re shy, but it’s the only way this person will ever know for certain that you like him or her.”

Draco turned on him so fast that Harry nearly sat down on the floor. “You don’t know,” Draco spat, his face turning an ugly, mottled red. “You’ll never get it, Harry Potter, not until it’s marching in enormous letters down the ceiling of the Great Hall.”
He narrowed his eyes. “And I am not shy.”

“You’re certainly unreasonable about it,” said Harry, moving away from Draco. There was no dealing with him in these moods. “And Blaise will only keep teasing you about it until you do something to counteract the teasing.”

Draco just shook his head and brushed out of the Great Hall.

Millicent and Pansy were laughing as though they’d just heard the greatest joke in the world. Harry decided there was no chance to get sense out of them, either, and strode after Blaise and Draco.

******

“Ew,” said Millicent, fastidiously flicking slime from her shoe with a spell. The Forbidden Forest was easier to navigate in the light, Harry had to admit, but it wasn’t necessarily more pleasant.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” Harry said. His hold on the egg-shaped stone he’d found after a few hours’ searching was tight. He didn’t want to risk dropping it and then finding another. Besides, who knew what centaurs might have against dirt on the stone? Or perhaps they would insist that he bring only the first he found and no other.

He knew the centaurs were watching them. The odd snap of branches and the even odder hoofbeat said so. But they hadn’t approached them yet. Harry suspected they wouldn’t until he and Millicent reached the gallows clearing where he had saved Draco’s life.

He and Millicent reached a pleasant stretch of the path, and Harry let himself relax a bit. It was a pretty day, most uncommon for December, the sun beaming through a pearly sky that lent itself to illumination as easily as the more usual blue. The trees around them had lost most of their leaves, but their trunks shimmered with splotches of gold from the light, and underneath their feet, the leaves talked and murmured as if they still hung on the branches. Harry felt a lively restlessness in the Forest. Most creatures were conducting their last business before the winter set in earnest.

The solstice was coming in a few weeks. And then…then he would meet with Lucius Malfoy, and complete the final step in the truce-dance. Harry felt a quiet shiver of anticipation run through him, not unlike the emotions in the Forest’s magical creatures. He thought he knew what Lucius would ask for, and he was alive with curiosity to see what he would receive himself.

Abruptly, the Many snake on his arm hissed so loudly that even Millicent glanced over. Harry stopped and drew back his sleeve, letting the little green-golden cobra see him. “What is it?” he asked, dropping into Parseltongue.

“Intruders,” said the snake. “We can feel them. They are using the same spells that they used on us in our first home. They are searching for the hive, and when they find it, they will destroy it.” The snake was vibrating with anger and anxiety. “How did they come here? Where are they from?”

Harry swore under his breath. He had promised that he would defend the Many from hunters, and he did not intend to go back on his promise. He turned and looked at Millicent, to make sure that he was speaking English. “Hunters,” he whispered. “In the Forest, after the hive cobras.”

Millicent’s eyes widened, and then narrowed. “But the Forbidden Forest is off limits to hunters,” she said. “Unless….oh, come on. That would just be stupid.”

“What would be stupid?” Harry was listening now, trying to make out sounds that didn’t belong to the Forest. It was useless. The Many’s hive lay deeper in the woods, anyway. The hunters could be near it, and Harry wouldn’t be able to hear them from this distance.

“Unless the Ministry allowed it,” Millicent said, sounding disgusted. “Unless they passed some special kind of edict that said hunting was allowed. They did once fifty years ago, when the Chamber of Secrets was last opened and the beast was rampaging around the school. They thought it might be lairing in the Forest, so they authorized hunters to destroy it on sight.”

Harry felt a brief shiver at the reminder of the Chamber—the memory he experienced when Dementors were near him—but he lost it in the rush of anger that followed. When he took a step forward, sloppy, new-formed ice broke under his foot. “Umbridge,” he breathed. “She would have the power to allow something like this, and I bet she remembered that I could
speak to hive cobras and had put them in the Forest. The Hounds could have told her. The bitch.”

“What are you going to do?” Millicent shook her wand into her hand and followed him, head cocked on one side as if she weren’t at all afraid. Harry supposed she might not be. His rage wasn’t directed at her.

“Defend the Many,” said Harry, but his mind was racing along another plan. His anger was greater than he had expected it to be. He understood it, though. Umbridge was only another minor thorn in his side. She aspired to become a major thorn, but he wasn’t about to let her. And he had a way to prevent it, too, a way to make her go away for good and all. “Deprive Umbridge of her job. Manipulate people. You know, the usual.”

Millicent laughed at his back, a sound full of dark promise. “Good,” she said. “I wondered what you were going to do for an encore to the dragons. Lead the way, Potter.”

Harry chose not to be bothered by her choice of words. He hissed at the Many, and they guided him and Millicent forward, towards the nest. Harry stroked the plan in his head, and hissed—a sound not part of Parseltongue—when he heard footsteps ahead.

You shouldn’t have bothered my allies, he thought. You simply shouldn’t have bothered my allies.

He crouched down, motioning Millicent to be still, and peered through the thick, tough fronds of some late-autumn plant in front of him. He could see two wizards, both fairly scrawny, dressed in robes that matched the browns and grays of the trees. They had their backs to him, and they were poised in front of the opening in the ground that Harry knew was the hive. They were debating something, softly, in voices too low for him to make out. One’s wand sparkled the dark purple of a spell Harry didn’t recognize.

“What are you going to do?” Millicent whispered.

Harry hissed softly to the Many in Parseltongue. The snake hissed back with enthusiasm, then slithered off his arm and dropped to the ground. It slid past the wizards without attacking, but called to its kin with their bond. Harry raised his eyebrows and waited.

The wizards’ debate had ended. The one with the dark purple spell on his wand threw up his arms, as if agreeing that the other had the privilege of going first, and stepped back. The other came forward, turning slightly so that Harry could see his face. His eyes were narrow with determination, his head cocked slightly to the side, as if he could see down the nest by sheer force of will.

The Many exploded out of the den like a writhing flower.

Dozens of the tiny golden-green cobras raced straight for the wizards, who jumped back in sheer surprise. The nearest one raised his wand soon, though, and began to incant a spell that Harry suspected was meant to contain or destroy the snakes.

He cast a nonverbal, wandless Protego. He heard Millicent’s breath catch sharply as his shield manifested above the cobras, throwing back the wizard’s spell, though he wasn’t sure why. With a wave of his hand, pleased that his magic stayed contained in his body, Harry expanded the Charm to cover the second slithering stream breaking off and attacking the other wizard.

This one didn’t back down or seem as frightened as his companion had. He began steadily to chant, his face filled with disgust. Harry suspected that that spell wouldn’t be able to get through his Shield Charm, either, but he thought this was a good time to intervene.

He bolted from the bushes, hissing frantically and waving his own arms. What he was hissing was really, “As we agreed, so that these buffoons don’t know what’s going on,” but it would sound like a command to the wizards, and probably to Millicent.

The Many coalesced back together with an audible rasping snap, which came from hundreds of scales brushing together. They turned to face him, many small heads spinning all at once. Harry felt their mind leap from body to body and coalesce in one particular one near the head of the formation.

Harry hissed again, “As we agreed.”
The Many began to sway back and forth, as if they were actually charmed by his very presence. Harry caught his breath and knelt down, hands held out, voice hissing a steady stream of reassurances. The Many flowed forward, slowly, and then faster, and climbed his body.

Harry stood up, draped with the cobras as he had been that day in Knockturn Alley, and let their tongues caress his face. The body that contained the hive’s mind at the moment curled around his neck and hovered near his eyes. He was still afraid, but the fear was a distant thing. He no longer seriously worried that the Many meant him harm; he only knew they could, and that was enough to keep a serious respect for them at the forefront of his mind. Let one of them spit, and I would be blind for the rest of my life. No cure for that poison, Muggle or magical. Remember that, Harry.

He hissed, “Quiet now?”

Their flowing voices came back to him, saying only, “Yes,” and then they all fell silent as one. The overall effect, Harry had to concede, was quite impressive.

He took a deep breath and lifted his eyes to the faces of the two wizards. The one who’d had the purple light on his wand still held it there, but he seemed utterly stunned and at a loss for what to say next. The other was nodding, his expression slightly more welcoming.

“You’re Harry Potter,” he said. “I read about you in the paper. Deadly creatures seem to like you.” He made it a challenge. Not so easy after all, then. Harry rewove his plan in his mind, and blinked. “I’m sorry,” he said, focusing hard on the hunters so that he wouldn’t accidentally start speaking in the wrong language. “I just got so worried that they’d hurt you. It was the only way I could think of to save your lives.” He smiled and shrugged slightly, a move that helpfully made the Many hiss at him. “I’m glad you’re all right, though. I’ll hold onto that thought as they kill me.”

“What?” spluttered the wizard with the purple light on his wand. Harry was glad that Millicent had the good sense to stay silent and out of sight, though she must have been as stunned at his declaration as the rest of them.

“Oh, the Many demand a sacrifice from the Parselmouth who takes their prey from them.” Harry blinked at them, making sure it seemed as though he thought everyone should have known that. “Last time, when I interrupted them in Knockturn Alley, they were content with my bringing them to the Forest and setting them free. But now they want to kill me. That’s all right. I’m just glad that I saved your lives, after all.” He closed his eyes and lifted his chin.

“Wait,” said the wizard who’d accused him of being friendly with deadly creatures. “That isn’t—we can’t let you die to save us.”

Harry opened his eyes again and gave him a small, brave smile. “Of course you can,” he said. “You think it’s a plot or something already. But I’d advise you to run again when they’re done with me. I won’t be alive to control them anymore, and they might decide that they’re still hungry.”

The wizard with the purple light on his wand straightened his spine. “I can’t let you do this,” he said quietly. “Harry Potter, my name is Tybalt Starrise. Will you accept a life debt from me? You must be alive to accept and fulfill it.”

Harry blinked at him. Now that he looked, he could make out the family resemblance in this wizard’s face to the handsome man with bells in his hair whom he’d met at the Ministry on the autumnal equinox. Tybalt looked as though he disapproved of most everything in life, but there was honor written in the harsh lines about his mouth, and his blue gaze was clear and steady.

Harry made his voice mournful. “I don’t know how I can. After all, the Many want to kill me for interrupting their dinner.”

Tybalt shook his head. “I can’t let you do this,” he repeated. “Can you tell them that I’ll offer myself to them in your place?”

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His eyes were filled with trepidation now, but he didn’t look as though he would back away.

Trust a Light wizard to be honorable even unto death. Harry had been counting on that, actually, for his plan to work as it should. “I could ask,” he said. “But they really want to kill the Parselmouth who takes their prey from them, rather than just getting the prey back. Unless—“ He caught his lip between his teeth and worried at it, as though he’d just had an idea.
“What?” Tybalt leaned forward, his face hopeful. The other wizard snorted, as though he were still trying to maintain a modicum of doubt, but his eyes were uncertain as they moved back and forth between his partner and Harry.

Harry hissed at the Many. “The next part is going to take some convincing,” he said. “Can all of you hiss at once? You don’t need to say anything, just hiss, and make it sound impressive.”

The Many did so. The sound welled up and around the clearing, and Harry could make out that it was composed of many distinct voices, which he usually couldn’t when they all spoke in concert. Tybalt’s partner took a step back. Tybalt himself remained still, eyes patiently fixed on Harry’s face.

“They want to feel safe,” Harry explained. “That’s why they’re angry enough to take my life. They were chased and harassed from their former home, and now they have eggs and a hive here. They might be able to let me go if I could promise they would stay safe.” He met Tybalt’s gaze. “That means that no hunters can come here ever again.”

The wizard behind Tybalt huffed. “That’s impossible. The Ministry authorized us to do this, but if we don’t do it, it’s just going to be someone else.”

“Sometimes, John, you’re an idiot,” said Tybalt, without taking his eyes from Harry. “I think he doesn’t just mean for us to leave and never come back. Isn’t that right, Lord Potter?”

“I am no Lord,” said Harry sharply, before he could stop himself. His magic flexed all around him like a beaten sheet of lead, briefly leaving his body. Tybalt blinked, then nodded.

“Your magic credits you with the title, but from your lips, I will believe the denial truth,” he said, the tone formal. “You mean for us to strike at the source. To get rid of the problem as soon as possible.”

“Yes.” Harry raised one eyebrow. *I think I know him well enough now that this will work.* “I have reason to believe that Madam Umbridge passed the new laws only as a means of getting back at me. She was there the day I was abducted and brought in for illegal questioning. She doesn’t like me, and she would have remembered that that was also the day I brought the Many home. She isn’t following the rule of law in authorizing you to hunt the Many, only her own grudges.”

Tybalt’s lip curled, and his eyes fired. Harry nodded, a shallow motion only the Many could see or feel. *I thought so. He was probably a Gryffindor. He doesn’t approve of laws being used for dishonorable purposes.*

“We can do something about that,” said Tybalt softly. “My uncle has been forbidden from political participation for a year, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us are helpless.” He glanced at the wizard behind him. “Do you really think we can just go back and pretend we never heard this, John?”

The other wizard slowly shook his head. The suspicion had faded from his face at last, Harry saw, and forbade himself a sigh of relief. He’d done it. He’d convinced them, and, as Millicent had lectured him to do lately, he’d given part of the responsibility over to someone else. These men could work far more easily inside the Ministry than he himself could—even better, if the way Scrimgeour had operated in the past was a guide. Umbridge’s days of pursuing her grievances through her new power were about to be numbered.

“Then, please,” he said, “make sure that Madam Umbridge can’t pass any more laws like this.”

Tybalt nodded. He seemed almost abstracted. Harry was about to repeat his comment when Tybalt murmured, “My uncle has been near you, but I have not. He declined to speak of your power level when I asked him about it, murmuring something about it not being an appropriate subject to discuss around the average wizard, at least until you’d Declared for Dark or Light. But he did smile when the latest stories appeared. And now I see why. Will you forgive me for not properly introducing us? My name is Tybalt Starrise, elder son of Alba Starrise and her husband Tiberius Griffinsnest, nephew to Augustus Starrise.”

He bowed shallowly, and then drew John forward to stand beside him. “This sometimes ill-mannered wizard is my joined partner, John Smythe-Blyton.”

John muttered something that sounded uncomplimentary, but bowed to Harry in return. He was Muggleborn, or so Harry knew he must be from his last name. His gaze on Harry was somewhere between awed and disbelieving.

“You hardly had time for proper introductions,” said Harry, himself torn between curiosity and amusement. “Why now?”
“Because the magic I can feel around you is extraordinary,” said Tybalt, and cocked his head and closed his eyes, as though basking in a fall of sunlight. “And it should not go unacknowledged. I do not know what my uncle was thinking, to engage in such stupidity as forbidding himself politics so soon after he met you, but I wish to remedy that mistake. I will send you a formal letter of salutation in the future.”

“Do you want me to become a Light Lord?” Harry asked. He was a bit unnerved by what he could see in Tybalt’s face. Better to get the misconceptions out of the way now. “Because I should tell you that I’m unlikely to.”

“No,” Tybalt whispered. “It’s the magic that’s important. You don’t really understand, but why should you? You rest in the middle of it.” He opened his eyes and smiled at Harry. “I will contact you, unless there is some reason that you don’t wish me to.” He had a patient, listening expression, as though he would understand if Harry said no.

Harry frowned. Why am I suddenly acquiring allies on the Light side of the fence? He supposed he shouldn’t question his good fortune, but he did wonder at it. He had become resigned to the fact that no one Light was likely to ally with him when they found out how closely he consorted with Dark wizards, and especially when they learned he was a Parselmouth. “I won’t forbid you,” he said at last. “But your uncle may have been right to ignore your questions.”

“He was right not to talk about you,” said Tybalt. “Not right to cut himself off.” He bowed one more time to Harry. “We will do what we can against Madam Umbridge. Luckily for us, we do know some of her weak points. Legacy of my uncle’s close association with the old Minister.” He nodded as though that were all, and started to walk out of the clearing. John followed on his heels, giving Harry a final bewildered stare that said he was somewhat surprised by all this, but would follow what his partner decided was appropriate.

Harry shook his head, and turned towards the plants where Millicent had been hiding as the Many slithered down his body. “You can come out now,” he said.

Millicent moved forward. Her eyes were opaque, her mouth stretched in a faint smile.

“Are you angry?” Harry asked, since he couldn’t make out anything from her expression. “He is a Light wizard.”

“And you’re sworn to protect and spend time with my little sister, Harry,” said Millicent equitably. “No. Not angry. Just surprised, and then surprised at myself for being surprised. I should have seen how far your reach would extend.”

Harry rolled his eyes and waited only for one of the Many snakes to encircle his left arm before he turned to lead Millicent back in the direction of the gallows clearing. After what had taken place just now, he expected their meeting with the centaurs to be somewhat anticlimactic.

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Harry leaned back against the couch and stretched. Overall, the day had gone well. The centaurs had watched his encounter with Tybalt and John, and hadn’t made much fuss about accepting Millicent as his delegated representative. It helped, he supposed, that Millicent hadn’t stared or acted as though the centaurs were the “halfbreeds” some pureblood wizards called them. That would certainly have started this relationship out on the wrong foot.

He shifted around so that he could more easily read the Parseltongue book, which was fairly heavy, and provoked an irritated sound from Draco. Harry grinned at his friend. Draco had been sitting on the floor beside the couch while he did his Astronomy homework, leaning back with his head near Harry’s leg. Harry appeared to have kicked him in the temple, accidentally, as he shifted positions.

“Sorry,” Harry said, knowing he didn’t sound it. “But you shouldn’t have put your head in the way of my foot.”

Draco scowled at him. Harry knew it wasn’t a serious scowl. In fact, a moment later it melted away, and left that same expression of pride and tenderness that Draco had looked at him with this morning. Harry raised his eyebrows. He wants to say something. I wonder what it is?

“Harry—” Draco started.

“Oi! Potter!” Montague, one of the older students, called from near the door. “Someone’s here to see you!”
Harry blinked and put aside the Parseltongue book, which was sometimes fascinating, but more dry; it was a history of famous Parselmouths in the past, and appeared to concern itself mostly with who they’d married and how many children they had. His visitor must be someone from a different House, but he couldn’t imagine who it would be. No one had seemed especially anxious to talk to him at meals or in class today, when it would surely have been easier than trekking down to the dungeons and the Slytherin common room.

“Just a minute, Draco,” he murmured, and slipped towards the door. Draco didn’t listen, and followed him instead.

Luna Lovegood was standing in the corridor, her face patient and her expression abstracted as she stared at the ceiling. Harry smiled and felt himself relaxing. Of course she would come whenever she wanted to talk to me. I wonder what the stones are telling her?

“What is it, Luna?” he asked gently, so as not to startle her.

“The stones are telling me about the lake,” said Luna. “They’ve felt many fish swim past in their time, but no Nargles. How strange. Would you go to the Yule Ball with me, Harry?”

Harry blinked, disconcerted by her speech, and then blinked again as he realized what she’d asked him. He looked carefully at Luna, but her face was absolutely serene. Of course she wouldn’t play a joke like this on him—she wasn’t that kind of person, it would never occur to her—but someone else might have put her up to it.

“Are you sure you really want to go to the Ball with me?” he asked, to test it.

Luna nodded, her eyes far away. “Of course. Unless you already have someone who will escort you. Then I could simply come for the dancing.” She smiled mistily. “I like dancing.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. It wasn’t as though anyone else would ask him, or was likely to. Besides, he didn’t think he could trust many of the offers he might receive. The people who thought him—he grimaced—a hero wouldn’t really be offering out of genuine liking for him, but just so they could bask in some sort of reflected glory. I hope Connor can find someone who really wants to dance with him, and not just a Champion. There was no doubt, though, that Luna meant it.

“Then of course, Luna. I’d be honored.”

Luna nodded to him, and turned and wandered up the hall. Harry watched her go, shaking his head. I wonder why she asked me? Maybe she knows that I’m one of the few people who will take her seriously.

He stepped back inside the common room, and turned around. “Draco, what were you going to s—”

He paused, finding Draco gone. He glanced in several directions, but didn’t see Draco in the common room, and was just in time to hear a door slam. He sighed. My getting a date probably reminded him that he doesn’t have one yet. Well, I’m sorry about that, but he should just ask this bloody crush of his, and then it wouldn’t be a problem.

He moved back to his Parseltongue book. When he was halfway to the couch, Pansy exploded in laughter. Harry looked at her, and saw her sparkling eyes focused on him. She was hiding her mouth with her book, but she was definitely still laughing.

“What?” he asked.

“Draco is so funny,” she said, by means of explanation, and then lay back on her divan and laughed her head off.

Harry sighed and picked up his book again. I do feel sorry for him, but he’s got to get over that shyness. People will only keep teasing him until he does. And besides, his crush might reciprocate his feelings. I think he’d be happier then. He seems pretty damn serious about this.

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Intermission: Two Conversations and a Reflection

“Well, I did it.”
Draco raised his head and glared over his shoulder at Blaise as he strolled into the fourth-year boys’ room. Blaise paused and chuckled at the sight of him, then took a seat on his own bed and watched Draco with a small smile.

On the silence went, and on, and on, until Draco ground his teeth and snapped, “What did you do?” He’d wanted to be left alone here in silence to brood over Harry, but as long as Blaise was going to intrude, he might as well have something interesting to say.

“I asked my crush to the Yule Ball.” Blaise examined one hand, as though trying to determine why he would ever had had any doubts on that score. It drove Draco mad. “And she said yes.” He looked up and winked at Draco. “So at least one of us is going with the date he wanted to go with.”

Draco threw his pillow at his head. Blaise went down beneath it, laughing, and sat up a moment later to throw it back. Draco hadn’t been prepared. He grunted as it caught him in the face.

“Honestly,” Blaise said, when Draco had clawed the cloth away from his face and could see again. Draco could feel his emotions, since Harry wasn’t in the room to provide a buffer or a shield, and they were all cool, focused around cold glee and something that might almost have been pity. “You’re making yourself agitated with not talking to him. And it’s affecting other people now, too—including him, and I think we’d all agree that an angry Harry is something we’d prefer to avoid. I wish you’d do us all a favor and just ask him to the stupid Ball.”

“He already has a date,” said Draco. The words stung his mouth as though he were spitting bees. “He didn’t want to go with me.”

Blaise growled, and his emotions turned hot. “You didn’t ask him, you prat! He can’t very well read your mind and know that you want to go with him if you don’t ask, can he?”

“The rest of you do well enough.” Draco rolled back over and shut his eyes. He didn’t want to hear, yet again, the note of pleasure in Harry’s voice as he accepted Loony’s invitation. It was plain enough that Harry really wanted to go with the crazy girl. He didn’t seem to care that she was only a friend he sometimes talked with, rather than the person who’d been beside him since the day he was Sorted into Slytherin. “I don’t know why he can’t see it.”

“Maybe because he’s messed in the head?” Blaise asked. “Quite literally.”

Draco sat up again. The note of scorn in Blaise’s voice would have prompted that even if he’d said something nicer. “Shut up,” he whispered, and the note in his own voice made Blaise pale, a bit. “You know nothing about what he went through.”

“Not the specifics.” Blaise lifted his chin. “But we can see the mark it left on his behavior, Draco, and yes, he is messed in the head. Not in the way his date is, I’ll grant you that, but in a different way. And you claim to know more about that than any of us do. And yet you’re still sitting here, waiting for Harry to act like a normal person. I think you’re going to have a long wait.” He abruptly shook his head and snorted. “And what the hell am I doing giving you romantic advice? It’s not like you were a great fount of it with my date.” He stood and made for the door of the room.

“I told you to stop drawing lions on your homework!” Draco yelled at his back, because he couldn’t let that pass without some kind of insult. “She is a Gryffindor, isn’t she?”

“None of your damn business until you see her on my arm at the Yule Ball,” Blaise said over his shoulder. “Where, and I remind you of this, Harry will be dancing with Loony.”

He shut the door before Draco managed to hit him yet again with the thrown pillow.

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“It’s no use,” said Ron, and fell into one of the desks, panting. Harry saw it tilt dangerously and quickly performed a charm that would keep it upright. There was a reason that these classrooms had been abandoned, and filled with this kind of furniture. Ron, mopping sweat from his forehead with one hand, and then shifting his grip on his wand as that, too, became slimy, didn’t notice. He blinked forlornly at Harry. “I’m never going to get it right.”

“Sure you are.” Harry kept his voice pitched low and soothing. He wouldn’t get irritated with Ron. He’d spent the last few
days in a haze of irritation, what with Draco being an impossible git prone to insulting everyone in sight and the pressure of Snape’s approaching trial date. If he concentrated, it was actually easy to pour out his irritation into something like this—an action where he thought he could make a substantial advance. He liked doing things, accomplishing things, and today he was going to break the block on Ron’s magic. “That’s why I picked this spell to practice. I know that you can perform it more easily than most wizards can. Your family’s been Light for at least a few generations. You can manage this.”

Ron shook his head. “You don’t understand,” he said, with a leaden disquiet in his voice that Harry knew came from years of failure. “I’ve tried for a long time, and I can’t break this block. I can’t do it now.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He’d been trying to coax Ron up to a certain level of power before he tried what he thought would actually shatter the block, but perhaps he should try the shattering process first. “Right,” he drawled. “I suppose I should have known better.” He turned as if he would walk out of the classroom. Though it was the usual place where he held his lessons for the other students, it was empty now except for him and Ron.

Footsteps pounded on the floor, and then Ron’s hand grabbed his shoulder. “What do you mean?” he demanded.

Harry glanced over his shoulder at him. Ron’s freckles were standing out sharply on his pale face. Harry snorted. “Just that I should have known that you weren’t really a Gryffindor,” he said distantly. “A Gryffindor would keep right on going. Gryffindors don’t give up. I thought you sat under the Sorting Hat for a long time. You should have been Hufflepuff, right?”

“I should not have!” Ron yelped, and his face flushed. “I’m a Gryffindor through and through! My family’s always been! You take that back!”

“Why should I?” Harry wrenched his shoulder free with a motion that, though easy enough in itself, looked as if it took a lot more effort than it did. He stepped back and snorted at Ron. “You’re not proving it. You might have argued the Sorting Hat into putting you in Godric’s House, but when it comes to the test, you back off!”

“I do not!”

Harry gazed straight into Ron’s eyes as he watched him get angrier and angrier. He made sure not to smile when he saw the block quaking. That would defeat his purpose. “Then show me,” he sniffed. “Perform this spell, and I’ll believe it. But otherwise, I think I should go to Headmaster Dumbledore and tell him that you didn’t really deserve to be—”

“I can so do it!” Ron whipped around, drawing his wand outward. “Aurora Speculae!”

Harry felt Ron’s magic rise up, roaring, foam for a moment like a wave at the block, and then splinter and sweep it aside. He had to shield his eyes as golden light filled the room, beaming from the end of Ron’s room and inundating the walls. Magic came with it, roaring still, happy, and Harry felt the corresponding tug and lift in his heart that the spell was supposed to cause.

The light went on shining for a time. It was the Sunrise of Hope spell, meant to signal a leader’s position to his troops on a battlefield and give them the continued strength to go on. Light Lords often used it to start a battle, too, with the invocation, “And so shines the Light against the Dark!”

Ron didn’t make the cry, but Harry hadn’t expected him to. When the light finally finished shining, he lowered his arm, and found Ron blinking. Part of that was surely afterimages, but another part was shock, expressed in his whispered words a moment later. “My block is gone.”

Harry smiled at him. “When you told me about how it was created, when you were so angry, I thought rage was probably the key to breaking it.” He shrugged lightly. “And it was.”

Ron blinked at him some more, then said, “You prat. You did that on purpose!”

“Of course I did.” Harry felt weightless, pleased, happy, ready even to go back to the Slytherin common room and face Draco sulking over his crush whom he wouldn’t talk to. “I know you’re a Gryffindor, Ron. It’s pretty damn obvious all the damn time,” he added, and walked towards the door.

He had to duck a spell aimed at his back—Ron was honorable, but he wasn’t stupid—and spun around with a hex ready on his lips. They dueled for a short time. Ron’s spells had a speed and power that Harry knew they’d never had, and Ron’s face
had a look of dazed happiness that wasn’t common, either.

Harry finished the duel laughing. There was nothing else that made him so happy as helping people.

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Albus settled back in his chair with a little sigh and looked out the window of his office. The first snowfall of December was sifting down, turning the sky and the grounds to one haze of white. Students trudged about in scarves and thick coats, when they ventured outside at all—except for the Durmstrang students, who went out in shirt sleeves, had snowball fights with each other, and laughed whenever someone else complained about the cold.

I do not know what I am going to do.

His project to test Harry, Albus had to admit, was not going well. He had tried to push Harry along two parallel tracks. One was to keep hidden, to stay further in the shadows, to make him used to the adulation going to other people. Harry’s deep embarrassment when he did something to attract attention should have made that one easy. Albus had felt confident enough in that scheme’s success to take him to the Ministry during Fudge’s hearing. The Wizengamot was sure to notice his power, but more than that, they would see how he sat behind Albus, and they would know who controlled him.

And then Scrimgeour had hauled Harry into the spotlight, and Griselda Marchbanks herself appeared to have taken notice of him.

Albus shook his head slowly. Bad as that had been, it was nothing compared to the fiasco of the First Task. Of course he was glad that the students had not been hurt, but did Harry have to save everyone in so noticeable a way? Dozens of photographs had shown up, snapped by the press ostensibly there to report on the First Task, of Harry looping on his broom around the dragons, staring into the dragons’ eyes, protecting the Ravenclaw students with a Shield Charm that obviously came from him…

No, that part was not going well.

That meant the second part of the plan must pick up momentum. For a time, Albus considered, it had been more successful than the other. Harry had been busy, had been dashing about and trying to exhaust himself with taking care of everything, had come near the edge of emotional breakdown from the moment Connor’s name emerged from the Goblet. He had nearly entered the state of mind where Albus believed he would be amenable to a few gentle suggestions that the Headmaster might make. For all his brilliance when he was thinking clearly, Harry tended to run headlong into traps when his emotions took control; it was the Gryffindor in him. Just one noose around his neck, just one offer of a comfortable place when he was breaking down, and Albus believed that he would have secured Harry’s power from any unfortunate uses it might be turned to.

And then the Slytherins had intervened.

It had not escaped Albus’s attention how closely his yearmates had stuck around Harry since the day of his mother’s last letter. They spoke with him more often, and didn’t let him withdraw into an isolated shell. And Harry, irritating miracle of miracles, responded to them more often than not, and throve on the trust they seemed to offer him. It was astonishing.

It was not at all what Albus had planned.

Albus half-closed his eyes and sighed. He hated having to make decisions like this, but if he did not make them, then no one would. And Harry needed some decision, some direction, some guide. If he had Declared for Dark or Light, Albus would not feel the need to interfere like this. But as it was, Harry appeared to understand almost nothing of how the world worked, and that other wizards simply could not cope with having a fourteen-year-old powerhouse running loose. Even his alliances with the Dark pureblood families, which Albus might have counted a restraining influence otherwise, were not enough, because they appeared content to leave leadership up to Harry. Albus could not imagine what wizards like Lucius Malfoy got out of that, other than a laugh at Harry’s (and probably Albus’s) expense, but there it was.

There was Severus’s trial coming up on the solstice, where Harry would be expected to testify, but the emotional exhaustion that put him through would be made up for his guardian’s reemergence into school life, since Albus fully expected the Wizengamot to exonerate Severus.
That meant…

Hm. Yes. Well, that might work.

Albus sighed again and opened his eyes. *It will have to. Matters cannot go on as they have been. And I will send him warning. On his head be it if he chooses to ignore the warning.*

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*Chapter Thirty-Five: A Deep and Tangled Tale*

*Harry dreamed.*

“Evan.” Voldemort’s voice was unmistakable by now, and Harry didn’t feel as though he’d just been hearing it in his dreams. It seemed as though it ran all through his life, threading through his dreams and binding them to his visions and his pain and his training, binding his whole existence to the night when the Dark Lord had come to Godric’s Hollow and changed things for him and Connor.

“My lord.” Evan Rosier dipped his head and sat down on the floor in front of Voldemort. They were in an ancient house, Harry knew that much, with a fire burning in a hearth and throwing back muffled shadows from a dusty mantle and fire irons. Voldemort sat in a high-backed chair, facing the fire, so that Harry still couldn’t see him. That was all right. He didn’t want to see him, not really. Nagini lay sleeping on the floor beside his chair. “I have been to the giants. They did not seem interested in what I had to say. They did not even appear to recognize the name of *vates.* They merely stared and grunted, until I spoke in their own language. Then they roared and chased me away.”

“You have failed me, then, Evan?” Voldemort did not sound pleased.

“Yes, my lord.” Rosier did not sound overly concerned. Harry flattened himself to the floor, grateful he was in the smaller furry shape—whatever it was—that would permit him to do that, as he heard footsteps pounding up a hall behind him. He thought he could feel a swirl of robes as Bellatrix slipped past him and into the room.

“My lord?” she asked, her voice trembling with excitement. It was a girlish voice, Harry thought. *Like Umbridge’s.* “You called for me?”

“Evan does not take his duties seriously even now,” Voldemort hissed. “Punish him for me!”

“Yes, do punish me, Bellatrix.” Rosier winked at her. “But use something other than *Crucio* this time, would you? I’m getting awfully tired of it.” He lay down on the floor. “Here, I’ll even put myself in a convulsive posture first, so that you can have the satisfaction of seeing me like that. Maybe then you’ll use something else.” He twisted his head to the side, crossed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue.

Voldemort made an indescribable noise of anger, and Nagini swayed back and forth, echoing her master with a hiss that Harry recognized as the closest a snake could come to a curse. Harry shivered for a moment, and wondered why in the world Voldemort put up with Rosier.

*Because he has no one else,* he thought abruptly. *If Bellatrix and Rosier are the only two Death Eaters attending him for some reason, then he doesn’t have much choice about not killing them.*

Bellatrix, predictably, chose to put Rosier under the Cruciatius Curse. As he had before, Rosier laughed throughout it, and Bellatrix lifted the Curse on orders from the Dark Lord, in disgust. Her right wrist was folded in her sleeve this time, and Harry could not see what it might look like.

“Very well, Evan,” said Voldemort, when Rosier’s laughter had faded and he lay there, looking up at his Lord with a smile. “Then you will assist me in another endeavor. We are attempting to compile a list of traitors to our cause, the cowards and crawling worms who have turned their backs on me.”

“Well, Severus, of course,” said Rosier at once. “He attacked us in May when we tried to follow Rodolphus onto Hogwarts grounds.”
Harry felt something twitch in his paw, and looked down to see that claws had shot out of it, as though he were about to scratch someone’s face off in defense of Snape. Voldemort only made that sound of anger again, and said, “Yes, Bellatrix had informed me of him. Who else?”

“She refused to assist us in the process of your most glorious return last year, and Fenrir Greyback bit her. For all that, I do not believe she has changed her allegiance back to us. In fact, I have uncovered evidence that she follows the Potter boy.”

“It will not go well with her, should we meet again,” Voldemort murmured. “Who else?”

“Hawthorn Parkinson,” said Rosier. “She refused to assist us in the process of your most glorious return last year, and Fenrir Greyback bit her. For all that, I do not believe she has changed her allegiance back to us. In fact, I have uncovered evidence that she follows the Potter boy.”

“I would win him back, if we can,” said Voldemort. “Send word abroad. We will find him.”

“The diary, Harry thought, feeling his scar burn in brief, hot pulses. They’re talking about the diary. They must be.

“Another unknown, my lord,” said Rosier. His voice sounded more even now, balanced, but also bored. “You said that he had obeyed Sirius Black’s command to retrieve a Dark artifact three years ago, but past that, we know nothing of his actions in favor of your cause. Greyback and Macnair said that they did not believe he was loyal any longer, but Macnair has always been jealous of Lucius, and Greyback is—not stable. He appears simply to be watching and waiting, rather than committing himself to one side or another. He attended the meeting in the Ministry the day Potter was abducted, but that could have been to please his wife and son, who are Potter’s known allies.”

“Waiting and watching would be like Lucius,” said Voldemort. “Before I lost contact with Sirius Black’s mind last year, I know that he was dithering, most unacceptably.”

“End him,” said Voldemort. “I give this kill to you, my faithful servant.”

Rosier bowed, stood, and strode from the room, his hands almost twitching. Harry tried to follow him, but found the hall running out in front of him and darkening as he traveled further from Voldemort’s chair. Apparently his dream centered on the Dark Lord, and he could not move much away from him. He swung back around, reluctant to wait, but wondering if he would hear anything else useful.

“Why did you want a final accounting of the traitors, my lord?” Bellatrix whispered, kneeling beside his chair. “I thought you had known already who was loyal to you and who was not.”

“I would have my known enemies marked, Bella, and those who might be persuaded back to my side left alone for now,” said Voldemort. “We must wait. The sun is rising.”

They both started laughing, and Nagini swayed back and forth, and Harry conceded that he was going to learn nothing else useful. He turned and sprang up towards the surface of the dream, clawing it down, forcing himself to wake up.

I have to open my eyes. This is only a vision, but Rosier is moving outside it, going to Malfoy Manor. He may have Apparated there already. Wake up!
Harry opened his eyes, gasping, and then had to blink hard as blood cascaded down from his forehead and blinded him for a moment. He wiped it away, and heard the Many snake on his arm hiss, partly in excitement at the nearness of the blood and partly in concern.

Harry tumbled out of bed, caught his foot in the hem of the skirt, and tripped. He heard sleepy grumbles from Blaise and Vince, but he couldn’t pause to either reassure them or cast a sleeping charm on them. His whole attention was fixed on the bed beside his, and Draco lying under the covers.

He drove himself to his feet again, tugged the curtains open, and hissed, “Draco!”

His friend stirred and rolled over to him, slowly blinking his eyes open. The half-smile on his lips melted when he saw who it was. He’d been intolerable the past few days, since Harry had agreed to go with Luna to the Yule Ball.

At the moment, Harry didn’t care. This was more important than whoever Draco’s crush might be or might not be.

“Get up!” he said. “I need you to firecall your parents, right now! Or—“ Another idea abruptly came to him. “If you’re sure that serpent you gave me will work as a Portkey for both of us, we’ll take that. Evan Rosier is on his way to question your father about Tom Riddle’s diary.”

He didn’t know how much of that Draco had actually understood, but he was scrambling out of bed, reaching for the set of school robes he’d draped on his trunk for the next day, and that was all Harry wanted from him. He hurried back to his own trunk and shrugged on his robes over his pyjamas. Blaise poked his head out of his curtains.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, irritation and weariness roughening his voice. “Some people need to sleep, you know!”

“We’re going somewhere,” Harry snapped, even as he opened his trunk and searched for the glass snake that Draco had given him for his birthday last summer, the one that showed Draco’s emotions for him and would also act as an emergency Portkey to Malfoy Manor. Harry hadn’t used it for a long time. He didn’t know why he needed to, when Draco himself had told Harry that he loved him like a friend. So long as Draco said what he was feeling, Harry didn’t require any extra reassurance. “None of your damn business.”

Blaise laughed.

Harry shook his head and found the serpent, snatching it up. He snorted when he saw it roiling with purple and red—anger and protectiveness, no surprise. Draco had been feeling a mixture of both of them for him lately. He turned, his arm already extended, and Draco clasped his wrist with one hand and the serpent with the other.

“Portus,” Harry whispered.

He felt the magic surge forward and claim them, and heard Blaise’s startled shout, in the moment before they vanished. Harry gritted his teeth and held on tight to the serpent and Draco both as the world around them danced with mad, dizzying colors. He hated traveling by Portkey. It never seemed to end, and in this case, with the great distance between Hogwarts and Malfoy Manor, it seemed to take an especially long time.

He and Draco sprawled together in a sheltered anteroom that Harry vaguely recognized as the place where Draco seemed to firecall his parents. Harry rolled over and climbed to his feet.

He frowned when he noticed the serpent was now shining blue. That was a color he had never seen before, and he didn’t know what it meant. I hope using it as a Portkey didn’t damage it.

“My parents should be here soon,” said Draco, wiping at a bit of dust on his robes. “They’ll have felt us come through the wards.”

“We are already here,” said Lucius’s cold voice from near the door. “Why are you here, Draco? Potter,” he added, when Harry turned and met his eyes.

Harry nodded tensely back to him. Lucius was his ally, of course that was true, but his dream tonight had also reminded him
that Lucius was the one responsible for his mind getting torn to shreds in his second year, his possession by Voldemort, the death of Sylarana, and the emergence of the phoenix web.

But even that had had good consequences, so that Harry could not blame him as much as he would have liked.

And Draco would be devastated if he died, which was the main reason that Harry had brought them here.

“Sir,” he said, “Evan Rosier is coming to the Manor. Voldemort sent him, to see what you did with the diary that you retrieved for him.” He paused, thinking rapidly back to the first time he’d met Lucius in the dance. They’d sat and talked until Draco interrupted, and, yes, an owl bearing a message had come to the window. Harry thought now that the message must have been from Sirius, writing in order to relieve the pain in his mind. “That was in the letter you got during my first Christmas here, wasn’t it, sir?”

Lucius’s lips pinched shut, but he only nodded. “Why is the Dark Lord sending Rosier?” he asked softly. “Evan and I were never close. He could not think that I would believe whatever lie he intends to tell me.”

Harry let out a low breath and fixed his eyes on Lucius’s face. It was made somewhat easier by the fact that Narcissa, wearing night-robes, had come up behind her husband, her face watchful. “Voldemort already suspects that you aren’t loyal to him. Rosier has orders to kill you if you can’t answer his questions satisfactorily.”

There was a long pause. Then Lucius bared his teeth and said, “I am disinclined to let him do that.”

Harry nodded. “I came here because I wasn’t sure what he might do, and because it is, after all, partly my fault that you’re in danger.”

“ Might I ask, Harry,” said Narcissa, her voice cool and slim as a dagger, “how you learned this information?”

Harry could almost feel Draco smirking off to the side. Well, no way to deny this now. He sighed and lifted his fringe away from his forehead, so they could see his scar. “This connects me to Voldemort,” he said quietly. “It has since the night of the attack on Godric’s Hollow. I’ve had dreams about him and his plans since I came to Hogwarts, but lately they’ve sharpened. I think my connection to him is growing stronger. I had a vision tonight that warned me Rosier was coming. Voldemort suspects Mrs. Parkinson, Professor Snape, and Mr. Bulstrode of having betrayed him, too.”

Narcissa simply blinked at him. Lucius, on the other hand, had turned pale.

“What?” Harry asked, hoping that he sounded ignorant and not shocked.

“The Dark Lord sometimes received—visions, dreams that might have been prophetic.” Lucius shook his head, his eyes never leaving Harry’s face. “He ascribed it to being a Legilimens, however, someone who had trained his mind so well that he might catch glimpses of the future from reading the likely course of other people’s thoughts. You cannot have developed your own skill so far. What are you?”

It says something about how frightened he must be, to have asked that. Harry shook his head. “The explanation is long and convoluted, and we don’t have time for it right now. Rosier—“

An owl flew into the room before he could finish, a large bird bearing straight for Lucius. Lucius raised a hand and steadied the creature with a frown. The owl flopped its wings weakly, urgently, as Lucius took the letter from its leg.

Harry stiffened, remembering the spell that Rosier had used to send an owl through Lux Aeterna’s wards.

“Don’t open the letter—“ he started.

Something inside the envelope, or else the letter itself, must have been a Portkey. Lucius vanished with a pop, and the dying owl fell to the floor.
Narcissa closed her eyes at once. “I can still feel him, somewhat,” she said. “He’s outside the wards. Furious, but alive. The wards would have let me know if he’d died.”

“Rosier must have pulled him there so he could have a little private discussion with him,” said Harry. He took a long step forward, and grabbed the letter, which Lucius had let drop to the floor.

“Harry!” he heard from a combined shout of two voices, Draco and Narcissa.

Harry ignored them both. He had to get to where Lucius and Rosier were, that much was obvious, and he didn’t think that sitting around in the antechamber and twiddling his thumbs would help matters.

This time, the dizzying pull and the maddening colored journey were short. He rolled to his feet in a little dip of ground that he recognized vaguely as being part of the empty land around Malfoy Manor. Now, it was naked, and glittered with snow in the light of the moon.

And it was dangerous. Lucius and Rosier were already dueling.

Harry lost his own breath for a moment, caught up in the sight. The wizards involved were both Dark, and so there was none of the holding back that there might have been in a Light duel. Rosier was throwing hexes and curses meant to wound and torture, and Lucius was responding with ones that would kill Rosier if they touched him. Both used defensive spells that, like the one Draco had employed on the stands during the day of the First Task, were meant to drive back an enemy, and not just block his attacks. The light of the many contrasting spells slamming into each other and canceling each other out showed the hatred carved on Lucius’s face and the amusement on Rosier’s, and their flying hair and bodies made shadows on the snow.

Then Harry shook his head and decided that he’d spent enough time watching. “Protego!” he declared, and the air in front of Lucius firmed and hardened into a glittering wall. Lucius stopped firing hexes at once, but Rosier had already tossed one off. The Shield Charm reflected it back at him, and Rosier hissed as it slashed a long line down his leg.

Harry forced himself to stop thinking that the hex would have hit the femoral artery if it had struck Rosier just a little higher, and then he’d be bleeding to death. He stalked forward instead, and let his magic escape his body a bit, clapping its wings. “You might as well face me, Rosier,” he told the Death Eater. “Since you’ve been so eager to all those other times.”

Rosier laughed, his face reflecting a lean and hungry joy. “Oh, Harry, Harry, I hoped you would come,” he said. “You couldn’t leave your ally to suffer, could you? Of course not.” He moved forward, his face a mask of pleasure now, his eyes never letting Harry’s go.

“One thing you aren’t,” he whispered, “is boring.”

Harry did his best not to react to those words. He didn’t really think anyone would suspect that his visions of Voldemort existed unless he told them, but Rosier was crazy and paranoid enough to suspect anyway, and perhaps wild enough to guess until he got it right.

“You could always give it up, you know,” Harry told him, as he backed into a circle, and lured Rosier into it with him. “Just turn yourself into the Aurors and accept the inevitable. The Dementors are gone from Azkaban, and you can’t run forever. The Black estates are closed to you now.”

“One thing you aren’t,” he whispered, “is boring.”

Harry performed a nonverbal Blasting Curse. Rosier dismissed it with a nonverbal spell of his own. Harry wasn’t even sure which one he’d used to counter it. He narrowed his eyes. That’s what not learning the Dark Arts before this does to me. I don’t know how my enemies defend themselves.

“The One remains, the many change and pass,” said Rosier, his voice soft. “Heaven’s light forever shines, Earth’s shadows fly; life, like a dome of many-colour’d glass, stains the white radiance of Eternity.” He smiled at Harry, and cocked his head
Harry felt the flame start in the center of his chest this time, a burning, many-colored thing, and then expand, as if it would chew away at the lining of his muscles and throat. It *hurt*. It was not a quick pain this time, not like the Blood-Burning Curse, but a slow one that would take hours, and torture him exquisitely.

And, once again, it had got inside his shields.

Harry narrowed his eyes and forced himself to concentrate on Rosier, who was watching him in fascination. He did not know the countercurse for this spell, but, more importantly, he thought that Rosier might get bored of watching him suffer any moment and turn back to Lucius. He had to make sure he *left*.

He focused all his will and his magic on the single goal of getting Rosier to leave. He didn’t know what spell to use for it, so he didn’t try to convey his intentions in the framework of an incantation. He just concentrated instead, pouring all of himself into this one goal.

Rosier blinked, and looked astonished in the moment before he vanished with a *pop*, slingshotted back to Voldemort. A spray of blood from his torn leg plumed outward and fell onto the snow.

Harry felt his magic roar away from him, and called it forcibly back again even as he sagged to his knees. The curse was still spreading outward from his heart. He forced himself to breathe deeply, evenly, and concentrated, this time, on stopping the anguish.

It would not end. The fire went right on crawling, and even grew stronger, as though everything Harry flung at it was so much oil or air to feed it. Harry dragged out a breath full of panic and pain, and went at it again. Perhaps he just wasn’t focused enough, because it hurt so much.

“*Finite Incantatem,*” said Lucius from above him, and the burning sensation in his heart stopped growing. “You can’t do that yourself,” he added, as he knelt down beside Harry. “The Burning Heart Curse is simple to end, but the victim is the one person who can’t affect it.”

“Stupid for him to use it, then,” Harry forced out between gritted teeth. The pain was as slow to fade as it had been to expand. Harry kept one hand clasped on his chest, and hoped, fervently, that if he ever did die of a heart attack, that it was a quick one. “Since I had someone else with me.”

“It is traditionally used in situations where the victim would be—largely bereft of such help,” said Lucius, and then held out a hand. “You can stand, I hope, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded, and jerked himself to his feet, using only the lightest grasp on Lucius’s wrist. He looked up, and met a pair of eyes several times cooler than Draco’s, though no less curious about him.

“I think,” said Lucius, slowly, judiciously, “that you should come back to the Manor and tell us how you learned Rosier was coming, and why you have the link that you do to the Dark Lord, and other things that I have wondered about.”

Harry couldn’t see a way to escape it, so he simply nodded, and followed Lucius back over the snow-covered clearing to the start of the wards.

*****

Lucius watched Harry Potter with a gaze that he knew would not unnerve the boy—that was not his purpose—but would conceal his own emotions. If it did that, then he would account this a victory.

It had been a very strange night.

Narcissa had sensed them the moment they were back inside the wards, of course, and come out to meet them. Draco had been behind her, but only for a short distance. Then he’d come flying out, and Potter had received a truly astonishing amount
of yelling. Draco had been genuinely angry, Lucius knew. He’d even started to utter obscenities, at least until he remembered that his parents were watching him and nearly swallowed his tongue. He’d bowed his head, and all but shoved Potter into the house, where he insisted on hearing the account of the battle, and criticizing Potter, and talking about what he would have done better had he been along.

Potter just bore it all, his head tilting towards Draco every few seconds, when it wasn’t bent over the mug of hot chocolate that Narcissa had had the house elves make for him.

They were gathered in the antechamber where the boys had first landed now: Potter and Draco on a divan, he and Narcissa on another. Lucius watched, while his wife asked the questions. Potter trusted her more. He would reveal more to her.

He was, oddly, gratified to see that Narcissa had been right about what would bind his son together with the Potter boy in a short time. His wife had always been more perceptive about that kind of thing; she’d been the one to predict all the marriages and joinings among their set when they were just engaged themselves.

At least Potter has honor, and loyalty. And the magic!

The magic, Lucius had to admit, was the main reason he had even considered being the boy’s ally.

Narcissa asked first, “How did you know that the Dark Lord was sending Rosier after my husband, Harry?” Her hand wandered sideways to him. Lucius clasped it. They didn’t often demonstrate their affection for each other, and they often argued, but that didn’t matter. Theirs was simply a relationship of the strong to the strong, and it was how they had always functioned.

“A vision, as I told you,” Potter said. “I’ve had dreams like this for years now, but they’ve sharpened and clarified and homed in on Vol—”

“Do not say the name,” Lucius interposed.

Draco glared at him, but Potter only glanced, and then nodded. “The Dark Lord,” he said. “He’s been their focus since this summer. He’s returned to Britain, and Bellatrix and Rosier have been with him, though he sent Rosier off to negotiate with the giants for a time. I don’t know where the other Death Eaters are.”

“And you never saw fit to inform us of this?” Narcissa’s voice had dropped several degrees.

“I couldn’t, without revealing how I got the information,” Potter responded equitably. “And I didn’t want to do that.”

Narcissa sat in silence for a time. Lucius watched his son again. Draco looked rather the way Lucius himself had when he caught Narcissa playing a dangerous game with her sister in their seventh year, a game that could have ended with her disfigured, Transfigured, or dead. Plainly, he thought Potter should have been talking about the dreams much earlier.

Yes, he should have, Lucius thought. And why didn’t he? My darling will ask that, of course.

And Narcissa did. “Why, Harry?” she asked. “Why didn’t you inform anyone of this? It counts as danger, and we are your allies. We would have protected you, as you have striven to protect us.”

Potter’s chin briefly rose. “I have—grown used to considering myself independent,” he said. “Partly it was my training, you know.”

Lucius half-lidded his eyes. He had glimpsed some of Potter’s memories the first Christmas the boy visited the Manor, nearly three years ago now. They had indeed shown an extensive education and training, but he wondered that the Potters should have taught their elder son all about pureblood dances and yet failed to instill in him a sense of connection to the allies he would make using them.

There is something there that he is not mentioning.

“And partly, I thought that you would think I was the same as the Dark Lord, or a plaything of his, having this connection to him,” Potter added.
Narcissa leaned forward. “What are you to him, Harry?”

Potter’s body stiffened. Draco laid a hand on his shoulder. Potter glanced aside to Draco, and he gave a tiny nod.

Potter blew out his breath and looked at Narcissa. “Someone whom I trust very much said that with the attack on Godric’s Hollow, I became the Dark Lord’s magical heir,” he said. He touched his forehead again and brushed the fringe away, revealing the lightning bolt scar. “He cast the Killing Curse at me, and gave me this. He transferred powers that he didn’t mean to transfer, too, like Parseltongue. It’s not complete, but that’s part of the connection between us.”

And he might have inherited the Dark Lord’s ability to dream prophetically, too, Lucius surmised. Or perhaps, since the dreams concern only the Dark Lord’s doings, it is a result of the connection of the curse scar.

Those were the thoughts on the surface of his mind. Underneath ran a quick, fiery exaltation that he was reluctant to define even to himself.

Well, most of it, at least. He knew that some of it focused around the words the Dark Lord’s magical heir, and the impulse to laugh at how wrong both of them had been, the Dark Lord and the old fool, and so many others, who had thought that they understood what had happened that night at Godric’s Hollow.

He could see the future, now. It was much more full of his own laughter than he had ever thought it could be.

Narcissa broke the deep silence that Lucius only then realized had engulfed both of them. “So you are the Boy-Who-Lived, then, Harry?”

Lucius returned abruptly to the present.

Potter closed his eyes tightly. His fingers were twined in Draco’s, the cup of hot chocolate sitting alone on his knee. A house elf appeared without a sound, took the mug, and left again. Potter didn’t appear to notice.

He let out a long, soft breath. “In a manner of speaking,” he said, opening his eyes and focusing on Narcissa.

Lucius sincerely thanked whatever fates had planned for Potter and Narcissa to be looking at each other, and his son to be looking at Potter. He was sure his face would have revealed his glee if anyone glanced at him now.

“Why is this not known?” Narcissa whispered. “Why not publicized?”

“Because no one did know.” Potter sounded exhausted. “Our parents were gone that night, and then they thought my scar was an ordinary one, caused by a bit of fallen ceiling. They believed that Connor was the one who had destroyed the Dark Lord, since his scar was obviously a curse one, and it fit—it fit certain parameters that Dumbledore believed in.”

Lucius could feel his nostrils almost twitching. Narcissa turned and looked at him, and he could see from her face how much he and she were in accord. There was a deeper mystery here, one they could smell, one that would change everything, if they could only figure out what it was.

“Yet you know the truth now.” Narcissa’s voice was a light, jabbing one, a feint, meant not to let her opponent notice the truth of her attack until it was too late. “You said that someone you trusted told you this. Why have you not brought it to the papers? What they could make of this—”

“I don’t want them to.”

Potter’s eyes had opened, and Lucius caught his breath at the coldness in them. Magic swelled around him, filling the air with a low snarl, a thrum of power. Potter cocked his head to the side, his scar flaring like a bolt of fire or blood on his head. Come to think of it, there were trails of dried blood down his face, which appeared to lead from his brow. A consequence of the dreams?

“But you must see that it’s for the best, Harry.” Narcissa’s voice was gentle, persuasive, patient. She’d given up the sneak attack as a bad idea, then. “There are thousands of people who would rally to your side if they realized what you were going through, that they’d been supporting the wrong Boy-Who-Lived all along. Think of the alliances you could forge if people knew the truth.”
Potter growled under his breath. Lucius felt the air grow colder. He was reminded of some times when his lord had been enraged, and he followed the instincts he’d developed then. He sat perfectly still.

“The truth is bound up with other truths that would make them despise me,” said Potter. “Being the Dark Lord’s magical heir isn’t exactly something that would thrill a lot of people into following me. And telling the truth would lose me the support of people who believe the lie, as well as make me even more of a target for the Death Eaters than I am already. I don’t think the wizarding world can afford to polarize itself in some kind of stupid civil war around which Potter twin killed Voldemort the first time.”

Narcissa was silent again. Lucius felt unusually close to her, and could tell exactly which twists and turns her mind was making. What other truths would make people despise him? And who is he protecting? He isn’t selfish enough to want his brother to suffer the brunt of attacks, from the Dark Lord or not, just so that he could escape.

“Harry—” Narcissa began again.

“No. I won’t do it.”

Potter’s eyes were blazing, the air around him wild with magic. Lucius lowered his eyes and extended his hands in an open-palmed gesture of surrender. Narcissa repeated the motion beside him.

Draco only leaned nearer to Potter and whispered something in his ear.

Potter relaxed abruptly, every muscle in his body falling loose. Then he laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound, but the magic had dissipated, and Lucius knew that meant the worst was over. He began to breathe again.

“No, Mrs. Malfoy,” Potter repeated a moment later, his voice much lighter. “I don’t want to.”

“That is your choice, Harry,” said Narcissa. Lucius knew her well enough to read the determination beneath the words. Any truth Potter was hiding might somehow concern Draco, too, if their lives were to be bound together. Narcissa would seek it out, whatever it was, and make sure it could not hurt her son. “I hope that you will at least consider our assistance in getting back to Hogwarts.”

“That would be brilliant.” Potter rubbed at his eyes, and as his aura calmed completely, he seemed very much a child. “Thank you.”

Lucius cleared his throat. “I do intend to come and visit you on Yule, Potter. I hope you haven’t forgotten? The evening of Christmas Day, we shall conclude our truce-dance.”

Potter’s eyes came back to his with gratifying alertness and awareness. “I remember, sir. I’ll see you then.”

Narcissa escorted the boys to the fireplace to Floo back. Lucius remained where he was, intent on dealing with his own emotions.

It is not often that the future changes in a single hour.

Not often, but Lucius had been through a few such hours before, including one on Halloween thirteen years ago. He could get through this one.

And revel, always, in the knowledge that he had made the right choice. It was pleasant to know that, when forced to commit instead of watch and wait and hover between decisions as he liked to do, he had chosen the winning side.

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Chapter Thirty-Six: Meleager’s Fire

The day hadn’t been too bad, Harry thought, as he lay in bed that night. Millicent had reported back to him that she’d been making progress with the centaurs, and that they no longer fussed at her about loosening their bindings right away—as she thought they had been doing with all their talk of wandering stars, though admittedly, with centaurs, it was hard to tell. She
could actually understand them when they talked, now.

Pansy had shared a book full of fey stories with him, which her mother had given her when she was a girl. The stories changed their endings to suit whoever was reading them. In this case, the book had been confused between Pansy’s and Harry’s moods, and had ended up choosing ridiculous endings most of the time. Harry had even laughed once or twice.

Draco hadn’t said much, but he’d simply been there, with one hand brushing Harry’s, or one hand cupping his elbow, or a glance turned on him, whenever Harry started to waver in consideration of what would go forward tomorrow. Since the night he and Harry had dashed to the Manor, he seemed less inclined to go into fits about whoever his crush was, more calm and reserved, balanced and watchful. Harry had to admit that he preferred his friend this way.

They had all done what they could to cushion him against the blow they knew was coming.

Harry closed his eyes.

_Snape’s trial is tomorrow. I really should get some sleep if I can._

******

Snape gazed out the window of his cell. Oh, he knew it was fake, the way all the Ministry’s windows were; with the building so far underground, there was no way that they could be anything but false. Still, the slanting of the sunlight, autumn sunlight over faded trees, gave him some peace.

He liked to think that he had learned to appreciate peace, and such views, in the past few months.

That did not mean that he was any less eager to get this farce of a trial done with and know, one way or another, what his fate would be. Either back in Hogwarts, teaching again, finding out the truth behind Harry’s and Draco’s carefully noncommittal letters, facing the Headmaster…

Or here, and looking out at the autumn trees again before they sent him to whatever prison they’d come up with as a substitute for Azkaban.

Snape shook his head and turned to the table behind him. The furnishings of the cell were limited: one table, one high-backed chair, one low bed, one rug, one bookshelf that filled up with books which vanished again on the room’s or his captors’ whim. The _Daily Prophet_ also arrived on the table each morning, though Snape did not often do more than skim the articles. The Skeeter woman was running out of new material to report about Harry, and had been reduced to reporting on the upcoming Yule Ball.

_There will be much for us to talk about,_ Snape thought, remembering the photograph of Harry on his broom, facing three dragons. _Not least, what you have been doing with yourself all these months._

And, of course, what in the world Harry had done to get his father to drop the charges against Snape.

Snape shook his head and took a place in the chair, reaching for the _Daily Prophet_. Of course, the headline announced:

**FORMER DEATH EATER TO BE TRIED TODAY**

Snape found that he had no appetite for news.

He put the paper back on the table and turned an impatient glance on the door. He still did not have his wand, of course, but the paper appeared promptly at nine o’clock every morning. That meant his breakfast should not be long in coming. An hour behind that would be his escort to the trial.

Snape told himself that was not terrified. He had faced the Wizengamot before, when he was first accused of being a Death Eater. He had done something far more terrible then. This time, there were only the accusations of the Minister to consider, accusations which Fudge, now deposed from office, did not even have the authority to try him for anymore. An Elder from the Wizengamot would do the questioning instead. It would not have come this far if Snape had been the guardian of anyone but Harry Potter.
And if I want to remain his guardian, then I will outface them all.

Oh, yes, Snape knew his two months in captivity had changed him, but they had not made him less dangerous, particularly when he had something that he wanted to fight for.

Someone knocked on the door. Snape paused, his eyes narrowing. Always before, the server had called his name and waited until Snape had opened the door to let him in; Snape could not leave the room without falling unconscious, but his being able to open the door to let in visitors let the Ministry pretend they were giving him a modicum of privacy.

_A slight change in routine, he thought. Perhaps someone bribed the guard to see the famous Death Eater prisoner today, when it might be the last chance he'll have. There could easily be a rational explanation._

But he had not stayed alive for so long by finding rational explanations for things that made him uneasy.

He stepped back and took his chair without a sound. The person at the door knocked again, and again. Still there was no call. _Unusual. Why?_

_Perhaps he fears that I will recognize his voice._

A moment later, there came the sound of urgently muttered spells, and Snape saw several of the wards on the door, faint lines of color he was no longer aware of unless he squinted, flicker and die. Then the buzz in his ears that reminded him at all times of the price he would pay if he tried to depart faded. Someone had taken that particular ward down, as well.

_I wonder what it’s to be?_ Snape thought, his mind cold and dark, working at high speed. He felt as he had when he was a spy in that last year of the War, but he had not quite descended to the level of the ice that had caused him so much trouble with Harry. He had promised himself not to go in that direction again. _Straightforward assassination attempt, or killed trying to escape?_

The wizard at the door pushed it open.

Snape pulled his head back below the level of his chair, and carefully, carefully lifted the shields on his own magic. In a silent rush, it rose around him, powerful and well-trained. He could not manage much wandless power in comparison to the Headmaster and Harry, and he had made sure not to advertise that he could perform it at all. He had no need of it when he was playing along with this farce, to show willing.

He did not intend to let himself be killed on the verge of walking free, however.

He recognized the heavy, shuffling tread of the wizard who came into the room, and curled his lip. _Macnair. No wonder he thought I would recognize his voice._ Snape might even have recognized his use of spells, if it wasn’t for the wards. Macnair was all lumbering, brute magical strength, not unintelligent, but hindered by a severe lack of finesse when he cast.

Silently, Snape prepared a curse that would pierce the outer lining of Macnair’s heart. He would die fast and undetectably; it would require an investigation to confirm a magical cause of death, and the Ministry was unlikely to conduct one when they saw the Mark on Macnair’s left arm.

The air around him clashed with steel as he prepared to let the spell fly like a dagger.

“Stupefy!”

Snape nearly jumped as he saw the red light of the hex stream into the room—coming from the door. He still could not see over the back of the chair, but he heard Macnair utter a helpless grunt and fall. That meant that whoever had fired that hex was a friend of his.

_Please. Or else someone who did not want to share in the glory of the kill._

“Professor Snape,” said Auror Mallory’s voice, calm and controlled. “Are you all right?”

Snape took a moment to smooth and lock his magic back under his shields before he stood. The witch was just powerful enough that she might sense something amiss, otherwise. “I am, madam,” he said.
Mallory nodded once, and glanced down at Macnair’s body. “We found your usual server paralyzed and blinded,” she said. “I don’t even know him. Who is he?”

“Walden Macnair,” said Snape. “As for what reason he would have to wish to kill me, check his left forearm.”

Mallory blinked once, and then banished all signs of her startlement. She nodded. “I promised that you would reach your trial alive,” she told Snape, “and you will.”

Snape nodded back to her. He could not say he liked the woman—her power level alone, dangerously close to his, made that impossible—but he respected her, and the respect was not all grudging. The Prophet said that she would be the likely choice to take over the Auror Office if Scrimgeour won the election and the post of Minister. She was a good choice. Snape trusted her to keep her word.

Mallory waved her wand, and conjured a plate of buttered toast and tea. “I’m afraid that you’ll have to eat faster than normal,” she said. “The trial will start at half past nine instead of at ten.”

Snape raised an eyebrow as he sat down to eat. “And whose idea was that?”

Mallory blinked innocently at him while she renewed the wards on the room. “Why, Professor Snape. These things happen, and I am sure I have no idea to what you are referring. It would be entirely out of line for me to tell you that Harold Hallowhunt, one of the Minister’s supporters on the Wizengamot, suggested that the trial should be moved up in an attempt to make your witnesses miss it. Of course, I am sure that Mr. Hallowhunt was only thinking of the good of wizarding kind as a whole.”

This one was trained by Scrimgeour, Snape thought wryly as he turned to his toast. And it is to be hoped that he wins the election. Madam Bones is too honorable, and short-sighted in her honor. We need someone who can make problems... disappear as well as face them head-on.

He managed quite a bit of his breakfast while Mallory Body-Bound Macnair and took him to deposit in a cell. His throat didn’t close up until the witch came back to the door, caught his eye, and nodded. In all, he was impressed with himself.

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Harry had expected the second time he was in the Wizengamot’s courtroom to be less intimidating than the first. After all, he had some idea of what it looked like, now, and how the wizards and witches liked to arrange themselves. And he knew that there were going to be people there today who were friendly and sympathetic to his cause.

It turned out not to be the case. There had been nobody at the Minister’s hearing who wasn’t either part of the Wizengamot or someone, like Harry and Scrimgeour, required to be there because they were part of the original process of the motion. Harry suspected Fudge’s allies had been able to insure that. Now, though, there were observers spilling into the courtroom, wizards and witches in everything from tattered robes to formal pureblood wear, come to watch and gawk.

Harry realized, this time, that Dumbledore took a circuitous route that, while it appeared to bring them into contact with many members of the Wizengamot, conveniently hid them from most of the watchers, or allowed at most a small glimpse. He didn’t mind. He knew that he would have to testify on Snape’s behalf, and he was prepared to deal with that. He was not keen on being recognized as “that boy what’s been in the papers lately,” as he had heard himself referred to in one terrifying conversation he and the Headmaster had barely skirted.

“Harry.”

Harry blinked and looked up. Dumbledore was watching him—closely, as he had a habit of doing these days, and without a smile.

“Once the trial begins,” he said quietly, “I will need you to mask your emotions. Severus has been accused of something that, all things considered, I would be quite surprised to learn he did not do. That means that we need to be patient, calm, rational, and legal. Letting your anger or your sorrow go in such a situation would not be productive.”

Harry nodded.
Dumbledore nodded back, and then escorted him to his seat, once again a small chair behind Dumbledore’s larger one. Harry took it with a sense of relief. He looked around, but didn’t see Umbridge, or either of the two other members of the Wizengamot who had voted to retain Fudge as Minister last time. He relaxed.

“Good morning.”

*I really ought to stop relaxing in situations like this.* Harry rose to his feet to greet Scrimgeour, a bit surprised to see the Auror. “Why are you attending the trial, sir?” he asked. “I thought you would be out campaigning.”

“Did I tell you,” said Scrimgeour, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, “that I’m a connoisseur of facial expressions?”

Harry blinked. “No, sir, you never have.”

“I like watching ’em,” said Scrimgeour happily. “I savor the moment when, for example, a criminal who’s come to the chair smirking and swaggering realizes we have all the evidence we need to convict him. I liked watching the former Death Eaters realize that their names and their money wouldn’t save ’em from being tried, just like normal people. I lean forward to catch every last glimpse of the woman who killed her husband and tried to make it look like an accident while the Wizengamot’s vote runs against her.”

Harry lifted his eyebrows. “I had not known you were so…savage, sir.”

“I expect to see some particularly choice expressions today,” said Scrimgeour, his affected Muggleborn way of speaking becoming more pronounced. “Yeh’ve got to understand, Potter, there are people on the court today who’d be just as happy to see the vote run against yer guardian. The Minister was one thing, a threat to their livelihood. Snape was a Death Eater, and a lot of ’em don’t like Death Eaters. Never have, never will.”

Harry clenched his hands. He could not bear the thought of losing Snape to whatever prison the Wizengamot had come up with in lieu of Azkaban, but he understood it was a possibility he had to face. “And you’re going to look at my face when they announce the guilty verdict?” he asked.

Scrimgeour snorted a laugh. “No. I’m looking forward to what they do when they call the witnesses for the prosecution. Watch ’em, Potter. That’ll be a sight to see.” He turned on his heel and strode back down the ranks of the court towards the far side of the room, his robes flying behind him, though there should have been no room to stride like that. Harry watched him go in puzzlement.

*I wonder why he’s going so far out of his way to help us? Was it just because he didn’t like Fudge?*

Harry had no answer, though, so he had to take his seat instead of doing anything better. The room was nearly full to bursting, and he heard someone already shouting for order. Since Fudge wasn’t part of the court anymore, and Amelia Bones was campaigning in her election for Minister, and Dumbledore had told Harry already that he’d turned down the opportunity to lead the questioning, that meant the privilege of leadership would pass to the oldest member of the Wizengamot.

*Who—*

“Attention,” said a gentle voice enhanced with acoustics spells. “Attention, if you would please.”

Harry smiled as he watched the little old witch standing up in her seat on one side of the balcony. Griselda Marchbanks was probably the oldest member of the Wizengamot. She looked it on her face, but her voice rang clear and strong, and people paid attention. Wizards and witches sat down, and, while nothing probably could have made the audience be quiet, their talking receded to a low hum.

“Welcome, ladies, gentlemen, and gentlebeings,” Madam Marchbanks began. “This is a rather unusual trial. The Wizengamot is trying it because former Minister Fudge brought the charges, but he is no longer part of the court, hence the reason I am leading.” She dipped a graceful little bow. “Madam Marchbanks, at your service. I’ve seen one hundred sixty years, served fifty of them on the Wizengamot, and still, I believe this is one of the more unusual cases to come before us.”

That increased the excited humming of the watchers. Harry swallowed. *Unusual? Why? Is there something I don’t know*
about?

“For starters,” Madam Marchbanks went on, shuffling through the papers before her, “there were two sets of charges in the beginning of the trial, one from the former Minister, one from James Potter—”

That name made the buzz increase again. Harry swatted at a beetle hovering around his head, and hoped no one would start looking around the courtroom to see if a Potter was there, or, worse, cast a spell to find him.

“But the Potter charges have been dropped,” the old witch finished. “And the Minister is no longer with us, though I hope the Wizengamot has done a good enough job in his absence. That means that the trial of Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master and Head of Slytherin at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, will be conducted on a reduced set of charges, and rely almost solely on witness and prisoner testimony, rather than the promised written evidence.”

Another buzz circled the courtroom. Harry closed his eyes and let out his breath. He could see why Dumbledore had told him to be patient, and keep control of his emotions. A misstep at this point could be fatal to rescuing Snape, since there were eyes that would be looking for evidence of shadows in the way Harry, and the other witnesses, told their stories.

“Bring in the prisoner!”

Harry found himself leaning forward, angling for a glimpse of Snape. It had been two months, after all, and for all that Snape had acted like an idiot in the short while before he left—and let himself get caught at it, which was worse—Harry wanted desperately to see him.

*******

Snape had always thought himself a patient man. As he waited before the closed doors of the Wizengamot courtroom, he had to reconsider that self-assessment. His skin was itching, and not just because he stood between two Aurors who both held their wands, while he had none, or because this antechamber was utterly devoid of any decoration, all bare, blank stone.

He wanted to get in there and get this trial done with.

Mallory frowned and walked forward to press her ear against the doors, as though wondering if she had somehow missed the signal to bring him in. At once, the other Auror, the young, nervous one with the ridiculous blue hair, gave a little cough and leaned nearer to Snape.

“Professor?” she all but squeaked.

Snape gave her a carefully measured look. He remembered Nymphadora Tonks as an indifferent student, not incompetent enough to irritate him, but not good enough to earn his regard, either. She’d also been clumsy enough to tip over numerous cauldrons, though luckily not to cause explosions. That did not bode well for whatever she was about to ask him.

Tonks bit her lip, worried at it, and then said all at once, “Kingsley Shacklebolt wants me to join the Order of the Phoenix, and I don’t know if I should, and I’m worried about it, and I don’t like it, and I wanted your opinion.” She stared at him, then, as if he should have immediate wise advice to offer.

Snape blinked at her for only a moment. Then he sneered. Tonks’s face drooped.

“Consider, Miss Tonks,” he murmured, shifting his wrists so that his manacles rang together behind his back, “that I was a member of the Order, too, and risked my life against the Dark Lord, and served Albus Dumbledore as faithfully as I knew how. Yet, in the months since I have been here, he has not made an effort to visit me, nor, so far as I know, to make sure my trial goes well.” He had to speak quickly, since Mallory was walking back towards them, and he chose his words with care. “Dumbledore named the Order after his own phoenix, Fawkes. But the bird left him last year.”

Tonks all but recoiled. “But that means—” she gasped.

“What means what, Auror Tonks?” Mallory asked, as she slid into place on the other side of him again. Snape could feel her watchfulness, knew she was more loyal to the law than either of them, but didn’t care. He felt better. Tonks had tried to hand
him her own burden, and he had given it back, with interest. That always made him feel more like himself.

“Nothing,” said Tonks, and then sighed. Her hair turned brown. “Nothing at all.”

Mallory looked at them both suspiciously, but the call came from inside then, and the doors swung open, and they could proceed. Snape walked with his chin up, masking himself in black ice, and returning the stares he got with such an indifference that he saw some of the wizards and witches shrink back. He moved his head in an indecipherable nod. That is as it should be.

Once, he had gone through this, and then, he had been stark terrified, relying on Dumbledore’s word alone to save him. Now, with less notion of what was to come, he outfaced the stares. Perhaps, he considered, it was because last time he had had only his own life and freedom to fight for. This time, along with that, he had the promise of returning to Hogwarts and Harry.

And that is too ridiculously sentimental a notion to entertain.

Tonks and Mallory brought him to the chair in the center of the courtroom, and settled him into it. Since his hands were still chained behind his back, they didn’t bother with the shackles on the arms of the seat. Snape was glad of it. He could arrange himself more comfortably, and sneer at people more effectively.

Uncompromising faces met his from every direction. Snape did not care. There were very few of them who mattered to him. He did note the old witch who would lead the questioning, and Scrimgeour’s endlessly amused gaze, and, of course, Dumbledore’s piercing stare.

For some odd reason, his eyes didn’t move past Dumbledore when he willed them to. At first he thought the old wizard was using some kind of compulsion, but then he recognized the flare of familiar power. Dumbledore’s magic could not quite cloak it.

Harry.

Snapes hoped he did not allow anything to show on his face, but then all hope of that went as a small shape forced its way past Dumbledore and up to the railing of the balcony, bending down so that its eyes could meet his.

Harry looked exhausted, even from this distance. But Snape recognized the clenching of his jaw, and suspected that the boy had just set himself to fight for him with every bit of stubbornness he possessed.

Snapes did permit himself, then, a brief nod of greeting. He could feel a sweet burning welling up in him, much like a pleasant version of the Meleager Potion he had set on Fudge.

I am going to come out of this alive, and free. If Harry has survived this so far, I can do no less.

*******

Harry looked at Snape for a long moment. His guardian’s face was not nearly as pale as he had imagined it would be, after two months of no sun. Of course, Snape spent much of his time in the dungeons anyway, so that would not be too great a change. And now he was sneering around the room with his customary look of disdain.

It heartened Harry more than he would have been able to express to see that Snape had passed through his captivity and come out the other side again.

I can do this. I can brave this, for his sake.

Dumbledore pushed at his shoulder, not-so-gently urging him back to his seat. Harry caught one last glimpse of Snape, to take with him, and then obeyed. He cast a Seeing Spell in the palm of his hand, as he had last time, to be able to watch the drama on the floor of the courtroom.

When the murmuring had died down again, Griselda Marchbanks began.

“Severus Snape,” she murmured, her voice echoing from every side of the courtroom thanks to the spells, “you are charged with brewing an illegal potion, which you did not register with the Ministry of Magic. You are also charged with
administering this potion to former Minister Fudge. The effects are unknown, but are not assumed to be beneficial.” There was audible amusement at that. “Do you understand the accusations that have been made against you?”

“I do.” Snape sounded—he sounded bored. Harry had a moment of pure and very Slytherin admiration.

“Under the Wizengamot’s Charter, you have the right to call a representative,” Madam Marchbanks said. “Do you choose to do so?”

“No. I will represent myself. I would trust no one else to speak half so well of me.” Another wide-spread wash of amusement.

“Very well. Do you wish to accept Veritaserum?”

“I do not.”

Madam Marchbanks sounded as if she’d expected that. “Very well. The prosecution has the right to call its witnesses first. As I am leading the questioning, I will take over this part of the trial. I call Cornelius Fudge, who has insisted on being here today to respond to you personally.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he watched Fudge bustle down into the middle of the courtroom. His robes hardly appeared less fine than what he’d worn when he was Minister, and he had the most intolerable look of self-satisfaction.

What is Scrimgeour talking about? What facial expression?

Fudge halted in front of Snape’s chair and cleared his throat importantly. “My name is Cornelius Fudge,” he said, before Madam Marchbanks could even ask him. “Until recently, I served as Minister of Magic for Great Britain.”

“Of course.” The old witch’s voice was very bland. “Will you consent to answer some questions about the charges you have brought against Severus Snape?”

“Of course,” said Fudge back at her, oozing politeness and charm, and Harry could see how the man had managed to win elections. He didn’t look at Snape, but cast a smile around at everyone else. His charisma was about as thick as algae, but that could be enough to convince someone who didn’t know any better.

“Do you charge him with both brewing an illegal potion and feeding it to you on the autumnal equinox of this year?”

“Yes,” said Fudge, without missing a beat. “I did not know at the time that the potion was illegal, of course, but the healers at St. Mungo’s have examined me, and they could find no traces of it that matched any known potion. They did find unusual traces in my bloodstream, however.”

Harry closed his eyes. Snape let his will to vengeance overcome making it untraceable. I bet he used ingredients that he knew would cause pain. Honestly. That is something I’ll have to talk to him about.

“What were those unusual traces of?” Madam Marchbanks asked. Harry opened his eyes, and leaned around Fudge to see Snape. He winced. Snape had gone slightly paler, which was not in and of itself a testimony to Fudge’s trustworthiness, but was as good as a shout to someone who knew how to read the signs. He had not expected anyone to find the traces, then.

“Feverfew and Fire-Crab shell,” said Fudge. His voice was smug, now, as though he considered having borne those ingredients in his bloodstream sufficient price for bringing down an enemy. He probably did, Harry thought sourly. He’s a politician. “And also, death angel mushroom.”

A hiss traveled around the court. Harry winced. Yes, ingredients to cause pain. And of course no one but a Potions Master could brew a potion that would keep that toxin from taking effect in a few hours. Damn it, Snape!

He could feel unease bubbling in the back of his mind, too, at the thought of how much Snape must have wanted Fudge to suffer.

He heard Madam Marchbanks asking the expected question—how was Fudge still alive?—and Fudge giving the expected answer—through Snape’s skill. He took a deep breath and looked down at the window again.

“We must concede that it is extremely likely a Potions Master could brew such a fatal draught,” Madam Marchbanks was
saying, her voice uneven. Harry was reminded of something Snape had told him once, how it disconcerted many wizards to think that someone could do something to them that did not require waving a wand, and might take effect hours, days, months, years, after it was ingested. “What side effects have you noticed from this potion, Mr. Fudge?”

Harry raised his brows as he watched Fudge flush for the first time. I hope Scrimgeour is doing this.

“Well, none,” he admitted grudgingly. “The only things I know about it are that it smelled like chocolate, and Snape—the prisoner—made me lick it from my fingers.” A titter went around the courtroom at that. Fudge tried valiantly to persist, though his ears were turning red now. “And there’s the traces in my bloodstream. But that’s all, really.” He rallied. “But that’s more than enough! Who knows what horrible things this potion could have done to me?”

“Thank you, Mr. Fudge,” said Madam Marchbanks. “That is all for now.” Fudge lifted his head and paraded back to the stairs. “The Wizengamot calls the second witness for the prosecution, Augustus Starrise.”

There was a long silence. Harry stared into his window, and then glanced up and around the courtroom, but saw no one moving.

He did catch a glimpse of Rufus Scrimgeour grinning like a fiend.

“Augustus Starrise,” Madam Marchbanks repeated, sounding a little less sure of herself this time. “Where is Mr. Starrise?”

“I can answer that, Madam,” Scrimgeour’s voice called. “It seems that Mr. Starrise recently fought a duel under the Sunset Accords, and lost, so he’s forbidden participation in politics for a year. I’m sure the Wizengamot understands the impact of this sacred tradition. Should Mr. Starrise testify in court today, he could literally pay the price of an arm or a leg.”

Madam Marchbanks was blinking. “But—such circumstances are not usually binding in the case of legal testimony,” she said. “I have seen witches and wizards who feel themselves tied to the Sunset Accords still testifying during their year away from the bustle of the Ministry.”

Scrimgeour shrugged elaborately. “In this case, Mr. Starrise felt that he should not be here. He sends his regrets, I’m sure.”

Harry grinned despite himself. He had to admit that the expressions on many of the faces around them were worth watching for. Some of them were obviously trying to figure out why Scrimgeour would have fought such a duel with Starrise and how he had won, while others were figuring out what it would mean that Starrise was bound not to testify on the former Minister’s behalf.

“I—” Madam Marchbanks shook her head. “Very well. There are no other official witnesses for the prosecution, then. Unless anyone wants to volunteer?”

No one did. Of course, Harry knew, even the ones who wanted the case to go against Snape must know there was really nothing they could add. Snape’s original meeting with Fudge had been too private for them to be able to corroborate what he had said.

“The case moves to the defense,” said Madam Marchbanks briskly. “Mr. Snape, the court will question you first.”

“Very well.” Snape had recovered entirely from the surprise Fudge had dealt him, and merely looked blank.

“Did you create a potion that you did not register with the Ministry?”

“I did.”

“Did the potion contain the ingredients that Mr. Fudge detailed—that is, feverfew, Fire-Crab shell, and death angel mushroom?”

Harry saw Snape’s shoulders tighten momentarily, but he said only, “It did.”

The courtroom all but shrieked. Madam Marchbanks had to shout for order before she got it, and she went on more sternly. “Why would you include such ingredients in the potion, Mr. Snape?”
“As you may or may not know,” Snape began, “there are many ingredients in most potions which, though fatal in and of themselves, lose their toxicity when combined with others. Death angel mushroom is one such.” Harry felt a faint stab of amusement through the fear when he realized that Snape was lecturing. “It is a common cure for poisoning, actually, the theory being that the extreme venom of the mushroom helps to drive out the first poison. There are some Calming Draughts that require it. The Draught of Cessing, used to cure convulsions, could not be made without it.”

“The court did not ask for a lecture on potions making, Mr. Snape.” Madam Marchbanks did sound interested, despite herself. “What was the potion intended to do to the former Minister?”

*Burn him*, Harry thought, and shivered.

“It was a prank potion,” said Snape, with a little irritation in his voice, as though he could not understand why people would keep misinterpreting things. “I intended for the Minister to exhibit some of the more embarrassing side-effects such ingredients can cause on their own. Thus, he would undergo the cramping and diarrhea caused by the death angel toxin. It was *not*, and I repeat, *not* fatal.”

There was a disbelieving murmur, and Madam Marchbanks said, “Is there any independent source that can corroborate this, Mr. Snape?”

“Of course not.” Snape sneered openly. “I made the potion in private, and did not register it with the Ministry. That is the very thing I am charged with, if I may remind the court. *I can* tell you, if you really wish to hear it, that I was well-known, as a child in Hogwarts, for making similar potions. The Headmaster can testify to that, as can Remus Lupin and James Potter.”

The court stirred and hissed among themselves. Harry could feel how delicate the balance was. On the one hand, they had no reason to believe Snape, and most of them would have been prejudiced by the mention of the fatal ingredients in the potion. On the other hand, it was undeniably true that Fudge had suffered no ill effects so far, and that, if it came down to what had transpired so far, it was the former Minister’s word against Snape’s. And this was the same court that had voted the Minister out of power only a few weeks before.

It was too delicate. Harry did not know if he could get Snape out of here as matters stood.

*As matters stand. They have to be redressed. Better, they have to be redressed by some dramatic gesture.*

*Good thing I’m so good at those, isn’t it?*

“The court has no more questions,” Madam Marchbanks was saying. “Do you wish to call any witnesses, Mr. Snape?”

Harry could almost feel Snape’s eyes rising to pick him out, as well as see it in his window, but Snape simply shook his head. Harry hissed in frustration. *Dumbledore told me that I’d be required to testify. I think he was betting on Snape calling me. And of course the stubborn idiot won’t.*

“Does anyone wish to volunteer as a witness?” Madam Marchbanks asked.

*Now.*

Harry stood. “I do,” he called.

“And your name is?” Harry thought Madam Marchbanks knew it very well, but of course she couldn’t see him directly from where she was standing.

“Harry Potter.”

The court exploded in excited whispering again. Harry could feel his heart hammering, his world spinning like it did when he’d just seen the Snitch and was about to fall towards the ground in pursuit. He knew how great a risk he was taking with this. It could so easily go wrong. On the other hand, if he didn’t do this, he was leaving matters up to chance, and he didn’t want to do that. He *did* want to play some controlling part, no matter how small.

*I guess I’m a Slytherin in that way, too.*
“Very well, Mr. Potter,” said Madam Marchbanks. “If you will approach the prisoner, the court will question you.”

Harry didn’t move. “I have one more thing to say, Madam. I wish to testify under Veritaserum.”

This time, he might have set the court on fire.

Harry closed his eyes, and fell.

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Snape would have gripped the arms of the chair if his hands weren’t chained behind his back. As it was, he could only watch in horrified, helpless anger as Harry approached him, and Auror Mallory, her face white with her own shock, brought out a clear vial.

Harry did not watch her. He watched Snape instead, and he couldn’t hide the faint flush on his cheeks, which someone else might have taken as born from nervousness or embarrassment. Snape knew better. This was born from exhilaration, from the incomprehensible pleasure Harry had in taking a risk.

He cannot take this one. He has no right to take this one. He cannot win if he does!

Except Snape knew there was a small chance he might win, as long as Madam Marchbanks only asked the right questions and not any of the wrong ones. And if he did, then the dramatic gesture—a child testifying in favor of his guardian, and a child hero besides, and willingly taking Veritaserum, which no one had even suggested to him—would swing support rapidly to his side.

He had no doubt that Harry knew that, too. It was the reason he would have chosen this course.

I will strangle him. The stubborn idiot! He has no right to make this sacrifice for me!

It was too late for that, though, and Snape had no right to protest when Harry was a voluntary witness. All was flashing uncertainty at the moment, like one of those damn Quidditch matches, and Snape could only watch from the sidelines.

Harry accepted the Veritaserum with a murmur of thanks, and placed three drops on his tongue without hesitation. Snape was not surprised that he did not look slack and inattentive. Harry had an Occlumens’s mind now, and would be able to watch the pale chains sprouting around his thoughts and commanding that he speak only truth.

That did not mean he could break them. Snape had never been able to lie under Veritaserum, only control his own emotional reactions.

Control his own emotional reactions.

By all that is sacred. In the name of Merlin. That is what he means to do.

“What is your full name?” Madam Marchbanks asked.

“Harry James Potter,” said Harry. He still hadn’t looked away from Snape.

“Where do you attend school?”

“Dur—Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” said Harry, showing them beyond all doubt that the Veritaserum worked, though he’d had no need to. He flashed a small smile at Snape.

“And your Headmaster is?”

”Albus Dumbledore.”

Madam Marchbanks nodded. “The Veritaserum is in order, then. The questions may begin. Mr. Potter, what do you believe Mr. Snape’s purpose in brewing the potion he fed to Minister Fudge was?”
Harry turned and glanced up at her, his eyes wide open and innocent.

“To hurt him,” he said. “And he wanted to hurt him because he was protecting me. Minister Fudge abducted me at the end of August, and held me in a private room without benefit of legal counsel, or my legal guardian. I was at first informed that my guardian could come along, and then denied his presence. Then the former Minister tried to drain my magic. Professor Snape has a temper. He decided to brew the potion because of that.”

Another murmur. Snape shook his head, a bit dazed. Harry was, in his own way, dancing through the interrogation even though he was under Veritaserum. It made Snape’s ears ring.

“Do you believe that he would have killed the Minister?” Madam Marchbanks asked.

“Yes,” said Harry. “He would do anything to protect me.” He turned to Snape and offered him a smile. “I am intensely grateful for that about him. He’s—” Harry’s face closed for a moment, as though he’d almost changed his mind about whatever he was going to say, but the potion forced the truth from him. “He’s the best parent I’ve ever had.”

“Your blood parents are still alive?” Madam Marchbanks added a touch of sharpness to her voice, as well she might. She was pureblooded, and for most wizards, blood family was important above anything else.

Harry lifted his chin, and Snape saw sweat gleaming on his forehead. Oh, dangerous, this is dangerous, they might learn something that Harry would give his life to protect—

“They both are, Madam,” said Harry.

“And you do not wish to live with them?”

“I do not wish to live with them,” Harry said.

“You wish to live with Professor Snape instead?”

“I do.” Harry took a deep breath, and forged on, before the witch could ask why. “Experience has taught me that I’m safer with Professor Snape than either of my blood parents, both physically and—and emotionally.” He winced. “I believe that he would have killed to protect me, but most parents will kill to protect their children from someone they think is an enemy. And the former Minister might have murdered me, too, for all Professor Snape knew at the time. When the facts of the case came out, the Minister attempted to force me to return to the care of my blood parents, with whom I feel profoundly unsafe. I do not believe it is a coincidence that Professor Snape grew so angry.”

Snape closed his eyes. He knew that someone else might think it was a sign of falsehood or weakness. He did not care. He could not afford to look at Harry right now without deeply betraying something that should more properly wait until he could speak to Harry alone.

I know what it cost him to admit that. But this is a sacrifice not torn from him against his will, but freely laid down. We shall speak about that, about his tendency to do that, but to hear the words, after all that has happened in the weeks before I was arrested...

Snape startled himself by feeling a profound moment of pity for both James Potter and Lily Potter, who would never understand what they had lost.

“I see.” Madam Marchbanks’s voice was deeply shaken. She cleared her throat, as if attempting to recover herself. “Do you believe the potion would have any fatal effects, Mr. Potter?”

“I think it might,” said Harry. “I am utterly ignorant of whatever other effects it could have. Professor Snape never confided in me while he was brewing the potion.”

All true, Snape thought, but it was a fragile tissue of truth that could be torn down if the right questions were asked.

“He never told you the name of the potion?” Madam Marchbanks demanded.

Snape stiffened. He could not discount the possibility that Harry might have seen his notes.
Then he ran the phrasing of the question over in his head again, and wanted to laugh. *Once again, one step away from disaster.*

“No, Madam, he did not,” Harry said firmly.

“You do realize that he still tried to commit murder, Mr. Potter?” the witch demanded.

“I don’t know that, no.” Snape opened his eyes, and saw his ward’s eyes darken as he glared up at the court. “I told you that I believe he would have killed the Minister, that he made the potion to hurt him, and that it *might* have fatal effects. But those effects haven’t manifested, Madam Marchbanks. Until they do, we only have Mr. Fudge’s word against Professor Snape’s. And as neither of them testified under Veritaserum, they’re both equally trustworthy.”

Snape began to breathe deeply again, as he had not since Fudge revealed the Healers finding the ingredients in his bloodstream. Harry’s claim would have been laughable in most other circumstances; who would trust a Potions Master who brewed potentially fatal draughts? But with Fudge his only opponent, with the dangerous Starrise witness removed, he had a good chance.

*And thanks to Harry’s utterly insane bravery, of course.*

“Thank you, Mr. Potter,” said Madam Marchbanks. “No further questions.”

Harry bowed to the court, then turned and bowed to Snape. Snape flinched a bit when he met the steady, open stare of those green eyes.

*You are worth this,* they said.

So Snape had *better* act like he was worth it.

He watched in silence as Harry turned and climbed the stairs again, and as Madam Marchbanks called for any other witnesses, of which there were none, and then for the Wizengamot to vote.

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Harry sank into his chair and closed his eyes. His ploy had succeeded. He was still alive.

*But Snape isn’t free yet.*

He opened his eyes, and forced himself to ignore both the curious gazes on him and the trembling in his muscles. That was close to the hardest thing he had ever done, not counting his confrontations with Voldemort. *This isn’t done yet.*

He watched as the voting moved around the Wizengamot. Amelia Bones was gone, as well as one other witch, and that left an uneven number.

Umbridge, of course, voted Snape as guilty. So did the other two Elders Harry remembered as supporting Fudge. Three to nothing, then.

Harry refused to bolt out of the chair, or gasp.

Madam Marchbanks looked down into the center of the courtroom. “Innocent,” she said softly.

Harry closed his eyes.

He heard the votes after that, and tallied them up in his head. No one was abstaining on this one.

*Thirteen guilty, twelve innocent…*

*Fourteen innocent, sixteen guilty…*
Seventeen innocent, eighteen guilty...

As if in a dream, Harry heard the voting tallied at twenty-four guilty, twenty-four innocent, and then the voices paused right in front of him. He opened his eyes.

“Innocent,” said Albus Dumbledore softly.

Harry leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, feeling tears burn behind them, while all around him the court erupted, yet again.

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Snape received his wand back from Auror Mallory herself. She gave him a tiny bow and a wry smile.

“So it’s Harry now, is it?” Snape did his best to stifle his protective snarl, and merely nodded to her. “I will,” he said, and then faced the stairs, his eyes finding Dumbledore at once, but not noticing Harry until he broke away from the shadows at the foot of the steps and came towards him.

Snape studied his charge intently. Now he could make out that the exhaustion he had seen was no deception; Harry’s face still showed the effects of lack of sleep, and intense emotional labor. But his eyes were shining, and his face wore a slowly widening smile, as though he could not believe he had achieved what he had.

Scolding can wait.

Harry halted in front of him, and they looked at each other for a moment.

“Harry,” said Snape.

“Professor,” said Harry, and then blinked and swallowed. “I—are you all right?”

Snape would have valued the concern in his tone in a different way just two months ago—as a sign that Harry was paying attention to him in the way he should, as something soothing. Now, he valued it as a sign that Harry cared about him—

If that is not too disgustingly sentimental a thought to entertain.

“I am, Harry,” he said quietly. “And though there are no words for what I have done or what you have, I will say this. I apologize for what I put you through before I left Hogwarts. I had no right to do that to you. I will not ask for forgiveness until you feel truly ready to give it. And I thank you for what you have done for me today, and for all that you are.”

Harry stood staring at him. He swallowed again, as though he wanted to speak, but found himself too choked to do so.

Snape did not even care anymore that people were watching. He knew what he wanted to do.

He took a deep breath, because there were still parts of him that objected to this and whose censure he could not so easily escape, and held out his arms.

Harry made a sound that had no name as he lunged forward and returned the embrace, and was caught in Snape’s.

Snape lowered his head and half-closed his eyes. Whatever I have done evil in the past, may it be made up for by what I will do in the future. I am not letting him go again. He said he felt I would kill to protect him. Well, I may do other things, also.

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Albus turned away from the scene on the floor below him. It could not have been prevented, of course. He did need Severus back, and Harry had kept his side of the bargain. He had voted for Severus’s innocence because he had to.

He had had no idea that Harry would do what he had, however, and he was surprised and unnerved at the extent to which the
boy relied on Severus. Now that he had his guardian back, he was unlikely to run headlong into the traps Albus had set for him, and thus the wizarding world was likely still to be in danger of his unbalancing power.

*It is good that I have plans already in motion, and that their fulfillment will come soon. I am sorry, Severus, Harry, but I cannot allow you to do what you could so easily do, together.*

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Chapter Thirty-Seven: Dancing With Luna

Another of Lily’s letters came at dinner on Christmas Eve.

Harry swallowed the bite of Christmas pudding in his mouth and scooped the letter off the table before anyone else could get too curious about it. Eyes followed the envelope as he dropped it into his robe pocket, but no one said anything, for which Harry was profoundly grateful. He kept his gaze on his plate and continued eating. After a moment, conversation resumed around him. Draco was muttering to himself about Christmas presents. Apparently, neither of his parents had sent him anything because they wanted to wait until tomorrow night, when Lucius would meet Harry and Draco after the Yule Ball.

*And it’s the conclusion of the truce-dance.* Harry swallowed, and then shook his head. He’d spent some hours meditating on it, and still he had no idea what gift he would receive from Lucius. He would just have to wait and see, he supposed.

*There might be a gift from your mother in that letter, you know.*

Harry focused his eyes on the twelve Christmas trees scattered around the Great Hall. Several people were trying to pack the warm, enchanted snow drifting from the ceiling into balls, and complaining loudly when they didn’t succeed.

The trees and the snow didn’t distract him. Instead, they just made him remember what had happened at Godric’s Hollow, the last time he had seen his mother, a year ago tonight.

*You’ll never know what she has to say if you don’t open the letter.*

Harry shook his head and stood. “I’ve had enough food, I think,” he announced, as heads swiveled around to follow his movement. “I’ve got a private lesson with Professor Snape to go to anyway.”

The others nodded, and Slytherins began to disperse from the table, chattering to each other. Most of the talk concerned the Yule Ball. Harry winced, and was careful not to look at Draco. He didn’t know if his friend had got a date or not. Draco simply went into frowns whenever he asked, or scowled if he was feeling truly angry.

“Harry?”

Harry blinked and tore himself from his distraction as the object of it came up beside him. “Yeah?”

“You do know that you can tell me who the letter’s from, right?” Draco had his eyebrows drawn down, in an expression that Harry had long since learned to distinguish from anger, especially since both of them were focused on him lately. “I mean, if you want to.”

Harry smiled slightly. *This is his way of letting me know that my problems matter to him just as much as his do to me.* “Yeah, I know that. I just don’t want to right now. I—“ He shrugged. “It’s too much,” he said honestly. *I don’t think I’m going to collapse crying this time—and oh Merlin, that was embarrassing!—but I still don’t want to talk to anyone about this. They’d all have advice, and I think it’s the kind of thing I need to figure out for myself.*

Draco nodded to him, and then they parted, Draco turning for the Slytherin common room and Harry for the corridor that led to Snape’s offices. He pondered the whole way over the letter that rested like a burning coal in his pocket.

*You could tear it to bits. But that wouldn’t give you the option of reading it later.*

And he did want that option, Harry decided.

With a long, quiet sigh, he decided that he might as well leave it where it was for now. He could always decide later if he
wanted to see what his mother had to say, that way, and he didn’t want to have make a more definite choice right now.

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Snape lifted his head when Harry entered, and then frowned. His charge looked as though someone had drained all the color from his face. He took out his wand and the book on the Dark Arts that Snape had set him to reading, but his expression remained frozen and thoughtful.

“Harry?” Snape asked quietly.

Harry blinked and looked up at him. “I—“ he said, and then shook his head. “I’m all right,” he said, in a voice that was convincing if Snape didn’t look at his eyes. “I had a few questions about the variations on the Blasting Curse, sir. I tried them, and I didn’t do very well. Can you tell me why that is?”

Snape raised his brows, but stood and walked over to the table Harry’d put the book on. If he doesn’t want to talk to me directly about it, there are other ways of holding a conversation. Snape did not want to go too fast or be too direct, anyway. He and Harry were building their bond again step by small step, and they took care not to spend too much time in each other’s company.

“You tried the variations that called for strength and not finesse, didn’t you?” he asked, as he recognized the page that Harry had the book open at. It already bore a worn appearance, as though Harry had read it multiple times in his attempt to get everything right.

“Well, yes, sir.” Harry blinked at him. “I’m not that well-trained in the variations, but I’m pretty strong.”

Snape nodded. “Your training sometimes leaves you at a disadvantage, Harry,” he said, and saw a small flinch in the boy. Ah. Something to do with his parents, as I thought it might be, given what happened to him at this time last year. “You were taught control, though in somewhat—different areas than what Dark Arts usually require, I will agree. That means that you’re used to putting your strength in limits. It’s not easy to dig it out of those constraints and simply go flailing about with it. And that’s what the strength variations on the Blasting Curse call for. You might as well be hitting out with a hammer. And you’re more used to using a dagger than a hammer.” He drew his own wand. “Show me which one gave you the best results.”

Harry gestured with one hand. Snape had noticed that, too, how his charge tried now to keep his wandless magic closely bound to his body. He approved it as a sign of caution, but it was also yet another sign of how Harry adapted to control before he considered freedom, for either his magic or himself.

He has changed, but not that much. He’s calmed around me, and around Draco. He accepts help more readily. But his own mind is still wrapped up in steel wire.

Snape watched as the Curse destroyed one of his chairs, which Harry repaired with the next motion, and nodded. “You will achieve better results if you attempt to choose one weak point, instead of simply spreading your strength over the whole of the chair,” he said.

Harry’s face brightened. “That was the commonality between the finesse-based variations that I couldn’t see!” he exclaimed. He shook his head. “I’m slower at learning from books than Hermione. I do much better with demonstrations.”

“That does not mean you are stupid, Harry.”

Harry’s head turned as if he were sensing danger. This was one of those direct things they didn’t talk about as much. His eyes were wide as they watched Snape, asking him what he was doing, to abandon their safe routine of the last few days. Caution edged his voice as he replied, “I never said I was.”

Snape spun his wand on one hand, thinking of the best way to phrase this. Nothing came to him. Speak as a diplomat, and Harry would let the soft words roll off him as he usually did. Speak as a Slytherin, and Harry would find half a hundred motives in the words and ignore the right ones. Say something that could possibly be connected to another person, and Harry would attempt to bounce Snape’s attention to what that person was suffering. Snape had had to make it quite clear on his first day back at Hogwarts that he was not interested in talking about Draco’s problems, Granger’s problems, Connor’s problems, Weasley’s problems, or anyone else’s problems but Harry’s during these private sessions.
“Your words often belie that. I have noticed that you inevitably denigrate yourself when you compare your actions and performances with those of others. You imply constantly that you should have been better than you were in whatever you do. You take next to no pride in your skills.”

“That’s not true,” Harry argued. “Not all the time. I made a comparison of how I flew to how Connor flies the other day, and it was complimentary to me. And I must have done it at other times in the past.”

“Then change ‘inevitably’ to ‘almost always,’” Snape said, unable to prevent a certain note of dryness from entering his voice. “It does not change what is happening, and I will not allow you to get out of this on a technicality. Think about it, Harry. How many other people would have been able to save a friend’s life, survive numerous wounds and Death Eater attacks, free their magic, defeat the Dark Lord for the fourth time, save at least half the students at the school, set three dragons free, get the Minister of Magic deposed, gain control of a *Daily Prophet* reporter, and insure that their guardian was set free in a year?”

“Third time,” said Harry.

Snape blinked. He’d become a bit caught up in his own words, and had lost track of what Harry could possibly be responding to. “What?”

“Third time.” Harry lifted his chin. “I told you, Connor defeated him at the end of our first year at Hogwarts.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “And you choose to ignore everything else on that list,” he said. “This is *like* you.”

“I don’t like to think about it.” Harry turned away. “Stop talking about it, please.”

“For now,” said Snape, deciding that he couldn’t press his charge too far just yet, but not wanting to lie and tell him that he would drop this, either. “Tomorrow evening—“

“After the Yule Ball, Draco and I have to meet with Lucius.”

Snape frowned. He had forgotten that. “Very well, then. The night after that, you will return here.”

“I will,” said Harry, and gave him a sudden, quick smile. “It’s nice to have you back, sir, even when you talk about uncomfortable things.” He snatched up his wand and his book and let himself out.

Snape closed his eyes, sighed, and went to pour himself a Calming Draught. He was patient. He had set plans in motion before that had taken months to arrive at fruition. He had been a spy for a year. He could do this. It was *not* too slow. He would break down a few of the barriers that Harry had placed on himself in the end.

His gaze wouldn’t stop going to the three cauldrons in the corner of his office, though. Two were empty now, the insanity potion and the Meleager Potion utterly gone.

The third, full of clear silver like liquid glass, still remained.

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Harry closed his eyes. He had, try as he might, been unable to come up with a combination of spells that would do exactly as he wanted, so he was trying his best to will Connor’s Christmas gift into existence. Or, at least, the overtly magical part of it. He had Transfigured one of his pillows into a blank book that should hold the magic once it was complete.

The air around him tightened as he imagined what he wanted. He pictured Pensieves—though not without a shudder—and Pansy’s fey tale reader and the book of pureblood rituals he had given Draco, and *shoved* his will into the book.

The magic raced around him twice, and then tightened on his body like a coiling spring. Harry let out his breath in a surprised *whoof*. He had not realized how much his power would change when he centered it on and bound it to his body. He didn’t think this particular change was a bad thing, though. At least it meant his magic tended to be more obedient than it had been. He opened his eyes to find out if it had obeyed him this time.
It had. Harry grinned slightly as he opened the book to the first page and found a written record of the time he and Connor had found a nest of fairies at the bottom of the garden in Godric’s Hollow. The little creatures had been extremely rude, and refused to reveal how they had crossed the wards.

He flipped through the other pages, and nodded. Each record was written “I,” from his perspective, and in his handwriting. All of them were carefully chosen. Harry wanted only happy memories in this book. No need to remind Connor of the storms they’d been through.

He put the book carefully aside, and then started when he saw Draco sitting on his own bed and watching him. He’d been alone when he started, but, of course, the magic had consumed him so completely that it wasn’t a surprise he hadn’t heard the door open and shut.

“Hi, Draco,” he said.

“Hi, Harry.” Draco lay down on his back and folded his hands behind his head. He kept looking at Harry, though, and his eyes were more intense than they had been since the night Luna had asked Harry to the Ball. Harry frowned and tilted his head.

Is he going to say whatever it was she interrupted then? But why now? He’s had plenty of chances before.

“Was there something you wanted to tell me?” he ventured after a few minutes.

Draco let out a long breath. “Harry,” he said at last, “do you think there’s just one person for every wizard and witch out there? That if they fall in love with each other, that’s it? They get married—or joined—and spend the rest of their lives with each other?”

Harry snorted. “Of course not. I grew up isolated, Draco, but I could read. I know there are lots of second marriages and divorces, even if most purebloods don’t like to admit to them.” This much, he couldn’t resist needling his friend about. Draco sometimes had a blindness to the less positive parts of the culture in which he’d been raised.

“But does the mere existence of second marriage and divorces invalidate the idea?” Draco had the pensive, contemplative look on his face that he usually only got when he talked about potions or the pureblood rituals he was learning. “I mean, maybe the right people didn’t meet each other until the second marriage, and then they’ll stay together for the rest of their lives. And maybe the people who got divorced realized the other spouse or partner wasn’t their perfect match, so that was why they divorced them.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think anyone’s perfect for another witch or wizard, Draco.”

“Why not?” Draco’s glare was abruptly of piercing intensity.

Harry blinked. Is this about his crush? Well, that would explain why he’s so interested in this, since he thinks it’s love.

Harry felt flattered that Draco would choose to talk to him about this, even if it was in an extremely roundabout way. So far as he knew, Draco hadn’t breathed a word about his crush to anyone else. So Harry gave him what he really thought, instead of the flippant answer he might have tried to fob him off.

“Because they can’t be,” he said quietly. “They’d have opposite desires and inclinations and arguments at least some of the time. One person would have to suppress all those differences to really be perfect for the other person, or manufacture the opposing desires and inclinations and arguments that the other person wanted them to have. It would involve crumpling their freedom at least some of the time. I hate the very idea.”

Draco opened his mouth, then closed it. Then he said, “But what if that person really does think the other one is perfect just the way he—or she—is?”

“Then he needs to go to St. Mungo’s,” said Harry gently. “And he’s setting himself up for a fall, I think, because what happens if the perfect person changes or makes a mistake?” He shook his head when Draco gave him a frustrated glance. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Draco, but that’s what I truly believe.”

Draco got up, sighed, and left the room. He didn’t seem angry, at least, just frustrated. Harry watched him wistfully. I hope he’s not setting himself up for a fall. Merlin knows, I can’t think of anyone he would believe is perfect, but then, I don’t know
Harry sighed and shifted from foot to foot. He’d agreed to meet Luna at the Ravenclaw Tower before the Yule Ball, but he wished he hadn’t. He felt utterly ridiculous in his dress robes. He could perform fine gestures and dances and ceremonies all he liked, he thought, but he just wasn’t cut out to wear finery.

At least the Christmas Day before this had been fun. He’d given Connor the book of memories, and received a book on the history of centaurs from him in return. Draco hadn’t yet given him a gift, but he claimed that was coming this evening, so it could wait. Harry intended to give him his gift then, too, since it wasn’t the kind of thing that could be carried or made beforehand.

James had sent him a Pensieve. Harry hadn’t yet dared to look into it, resulting in a somewhat awkward letter of thanks.

Draco had been reasonable, resigned, it seemed, to the fact that his crush wouldn’t attend the Ball with him. He’d still dressed up as though he were going, so Harry assumed he’d see him there.

“There you are, Harry.”

Harry blinked once as Luna came out of the Tower, and then blinked again. She had on delicate blue robes with silver trim, which would have looked completely normal if not for the bits of silver tinsel also stuck on them. Harry wondered if the tinsel was meant to represent stars, the kind that Dumbledore’s robes often showed, but they were not star-shaped, and if there was any pattern, Harry couldn’t see it. Luna had on a necklace of feathers braided so intricately that Harry couldn’t make out anything but a bristling mass of, well, feather, and her hat had long silver ribbons that curled into her blonde hair, around her ears, under her chin, and sometimes left her hat altogether and explored up and down her neck and shoulders, like serpents.

“You look very noticeable, Luna,” said Harry, because he wouldn’t give her false gallantry. Luna smiled at him.

“So do you, Harry,” she said, and held out another necklace. “Merry Christmas.”

Harry ducked his head, embarrassed, so she could put it around his throat. “I’m sorry, Luna. I didn’t get anything for you.”

Luna gave him a strange glance as she straightened again. “Yes, you did. You’re dancing with me and taking me to the Ball.”

Harry would have argued that she’d been the one to ask him, but he knew she honestly wouldn’t know what he was talking about, so he offered her his arm. “Shall we go downstairs?”

Luna put her hand on his forearm in the three-fingered posture correct for a younger witch letting an older wizard escort her—well, after all, she was pureblood—and glided down the hall beside him. Harry took the opportunity to study the necklace she’d given him out of the corner of his eye.

“Luna,” he said after a moment.

“Yes, Harry?” She glanced up at him, her face utterly serene.

“What kind of teeth are these?” They didn’t look like any he’d seen before, even as ingredients in advanced potions. They had delicate spindles rising from a flat base, and ended in four tiny, jagged spikes, as if the teeth had smaller teeth inside them.

“Hippogriff teeth,” said Luna.

“But hippogriffs don’t have teeth,” said Harry.

“They do,” said Luna. “If you look. They take out their teeth by the light of the full moon and hide them away, so that people can use them for necklaces and charms. But you can only find them if you’re looking for them, and for that purpose. The hippogriffs don’t want their teeth to be used for anything else.”
Harry hesitated, then decided that he wouldn’t gain much from questioning her. He would feel like he was badgering her, thought of course she would be content to patiently explain anything that he didn’t understand. Besides, why should he worry about it tonight? Tonight was a night for having fun.

He relaxed and smiled. “I never knew that,” he said. “Do they tell you anything? You know, like the chairs about Helga Hufflepuff?”

Luna sniffed. “Not anything interesting. Hippogriff teeth only want to talk about the full moon, and there’s only so many times that you can hear about it rising and setting and waxing and waning before you want something different.”

Harry found himself smiling more widely. She’s probably the best person I could have taken to the Ball. It’s impossible to be self-conscious or worry about my dancing when she’s around. There are so many more interesting things to worry about.

They reached the doors of the Great Hall soon enough, and joined the crowd of students milling outside it. Harry spotted Viktor Krum, who nodded tersely at him. The Durmstrang Champion hadn’t been that happy about Harry apparently upstaging him at the First Task, but he’d made no secret of the fact that he felt a sort of grudging respect as well, and Harry didn’t think the scowl on the other boy’s face had anything to do with him. His date, one of the upper-year Gryffindor girls whom Harry didn’t know very well, kept sneaking glances at him, as if she couldn’t believe she was here with him. Krum ignored her entirely.

Fleur Delacour actually sought him out, smiling at him and tossing her long silver hair. “’Ello, Harry,” she murmured. Her gaze took in Luna, and her eyebrows rose, but she didn’t say anything. Harry didn’t think she had grounds to say anything at all, given that her date, Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, was all but drooling as he looked at her. He had his hand on her arm in the wrong position, as well.

Harry caught the snobbish tone of that thought, and blinked. Since when did I become Draco?

Harry nodded back to Fleur. “Are you looking forward to the dancing?” he asked, since he could think of nothing else to ask her.

Fleur laughed, a sound that increased her beauty. “Of course,” she said. “Dancing eez an art in my country. I look forward to showing everyone how it eez done!”

You have an unfair advantage, given your blood, Harry thought, but he murmured something polite that seemed to content Fleur. She led Roger away, absentmindedly moving her sleeve so that he couldn’t drool on her robes.

“Hi, Harry.”

Harry turned around—Luna was looking in the opposite direction, and for a moment he almost stumbled—to smile at his twin. Connor looked good enough in his red dress robes, though nervous.

Harry blinked when he saw his brother’s date. Connor had only winked when Harry asked about her or him, and said that Harry would just have to wait to find out. Harry had, for some reason, imagined that Connor would bring someone from another House, rather than Parvati Patil.

Parvati ducked her head and blushed when she saw Harry looking at her, but she didn’t giggle. She was much less annoying when she didn’t do that, Harry had to concede. “Hi, Harry, Luna.” She didn’t appear startled by Luna’s robes, and Harry had to give her mental points for that, even if it was probably because Parvati admired Professor Trelawney too much to laugh at strange clothes. “When do you think they’re going to let us into the Hall?” She looked imperiously over several people’s heads, as though she could command the doors to open by sheer force of will alone.

Connor patted her shoulder. “Probably in a few minutes,” he said. His face was soft when he looked at Parvati. Harry blinked again. He had utterly, utterly missed that Connor was crushing on someone, and he looked both pleased and proud to have Parvati here with him.

What else have I missed, I wonder?

“In four minutes,” said Luna.
Everyone in the immediate vicinity looked at her.

“In four minutes they’ll open the doors,” Luna clarified helpfully. “I heard the doors say so.”

Connor couldn’t quite hide a smile, but Harry was curious. He cast a Tempus charm, checked the time, and decided to wait.

“Where’s Ron?” he asked then, since he thought it was odd that Ron wouldn’t be at his best friend’s right shoulder.

Connor winced. “Um, he came alone,” he said. “His date didn’t work out.”

“It would if he’d asked her the right way,” said Parvati primly. “My sister does not enjoy being asked out by someone too angry to get her name right.”

“What’s he angry about?” Harry asked.

Connor winced again, then abruptly looked over Harry’s shoulder and stared. “Because of them,” he said. “Oh, Merlin. I rather hoped they’d have the sense not to flaunt it, after everything.”

Harry turned around. Blaise Zabini had entered the room, posing, not at all coincidentally, as a flash of light from a charm exploded around him like a camera. He looked good enough, Harry supposed, but his most noteworthy feature was the very pleased smirk that he turned on his date.

Ginny Weasley was on his arm.

“Tell me,” Harry muttered to his brother, “was he upset about Ginny dating Blaise, or dating at all?” Ron did sometimes act insanely protective of his younger sister, as though she would shatter if she were dropped. Connor had told him that they’d had a fight at the beginning of the year, before they found out Quidditch was canceled, about Ginny joining the Quidditch team. She wanted to be a Chaser. Ron was worried for her, but he’d chosen to phrase it as “You can’t play!” That argument had lasted for a while, and this was one was almost certain to be worse, to judge by the mulish expression on Ginny’s face as Blaise guided her into the room.

Connor sighed. “It started out with Blaise,” he said. “Then it went through boys, who Ron apparently thinks are lining up to push Ginny into a wall and snog her senseless. I think it ended somewhere around how Ron doesn’t want her dating a ‘slimy Slytherin.’”

“Bad, then,” Harry surmised.

Connor closed his eyes and gave a tight little nod. “And Ron got worse when Padma wouldn’t go out with him because he forgot her name and shouted at her.”

“She was totally within her rights,” said Parvati coolly.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean that,” Connor hastened to reassure her. “I just meant that—“

“Welcome, students, to the Yule Ball,” announced Professor McGonagall, as the doors swung open.

Harry cast the Tempus charm again, and shook his head. “It’s four minutes later,” he told Luna. “You were right.”

Luna eyed him. “I wasn’t right. The doors were right.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself.

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Draco was trying to decide if being at the Yule Ball without Harry was worse than staying in their room would have been. So far, he hadn’t come to any definite conclusions.

On the one hand, of course, he could watch, and see that Harry didn’t get groped by anyone else, and he had the great pleasure of seeing that Harry sat out at least half the dances, talking to Loony.
On the other hand, he was talking to Loony. And plenty of other people were looking at him, not that Harry noticed, the prat.

*He doesn’t notice the people looking at him like that in his own room. Why would he see it now?*

Draco wished the professors allowed any drink stronger than butterbeer. It wasn’t that he’d had a lot of opportunity to get drunk on wine, as opposed to taste it, but at least he wouldn’t be coherent enough to feel miserable. Besides, nothing could possibly make him feel worse than he did right now.

“Draco.”

*Is there some Fate assigned to listen to me and make my life worse whenever I think something like that?*

Draco turned around and nodded tersely to Blaise. “Zabini,” he said, and watched Blaise smirk at him.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” Blaise leaned past Draco to pick up one of the mince pies from the table behind him. Draco had chosen to stand near the food, since it was relatively central and let him see Harry even when he was dancing. “No need to be bitter, Malfoy, just because I got my crush to dance with me and yours doesn’t even notice that you exist.”

“The Weasel’s little sister,” Draco said, feeling glad that Blaise had given him the excuse to dip his tongue in acid. “Oh, yes, that’s a conquest, all right.”

Blaise just shrugged at him. “She’s pretty,” he said. “I like her. She makes me laugh. And that she’ll tell her brother to sod off so she can date me is kind of a turn-on. Meanwhile, you claim to have this great, burning, blazing love for Harry, and all you do is moon after him and glare at anyone who touches him too often. I told you, you’ve got to tell him.” Blaise paused, licking his fingers; Draco heroically refrained from commenting on this appalling lack of taste. “Or someone else could tell him,” Blaise added. “Like me, for example.”

Draco had drawn his wand before he realized what was happening. Blaise laughed, but couldn’t quite mask the widening of his eyes.

“I’ve finally taken part of your stupid advice,” Draco growled, when he could speak. “I know Harry’s not like a *normal* person, and so I’ve got to treat him differently. But he’s not going to take it well, or even understand it, if the time’s not right. So shut it, Blaise, or I can make sure you shut it more permanently. I know the Vanishing Mouth Hex, you know.”

Blaise’s mouth dropped open in spite of himself; then he shut it as though he thought Draco might choose to cast the hex right then. “You do not,” he said. “That’s Dark Arts.”

Draco sighed. “Zabini, think about what my father was, *please.*”

Blaise studied him for a moment more, then shrugged. “Fine. He won’t hear it from me. But you can’t have everything just as you like, Malfoy.” His eyes were shining with spite, which was fine with Draco; he preferred it to what Blaise was pleased to call “humor.” “Someone is going to tell him one of these days. Or take a chance on him themselves, you know. Pansy fancies him, a bit.”

Draco could well believe it. “But not today, she won’t,” he said, glancing over to where Pansy was dancing with Montague.

“But not today,” Blaise acknowledged. “But soon enough.”

Draco turned his back on him loftily. “Soon enough” was not “today.”

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“Sometimes objects are influenced by what’s going on around them in the present,” Luna was explaining as Harry led her back to the floor for a third dance. “The floor is talking about dances right now, because that’s what people are doing on it right now.”

Harry nodded slowly. As much as he could understand Luna’s peculiar gift, which appeared to be a kind of empathy tuned to objects alone, that made sense to him. “Are they telling you about any particular ones?”
Luna laughed gently as Harry spun her through the first measure of the music. She barely moved when she was dancing, letting Harry's hands guide her, but her ribbons made up for it, writhing excitedly around her head and trailing behind her, like her hair, when she turned around. “They’re remembering the time Salazar Slytherin danced with Rowena Ravenclaw. He only did it once, because he said that she stepped on his feet. Just to show him, she didn’t step on his feet once the whole dance, and then told him she’d never dance with him again. He sulked for a week.”

Harry cocked his head to the side as he and Luna briefly parted and then came back together again, only their fingertips touching this time. This dance wasn’t one he’d practiced often, but he could watch the other dancers from a corner of his eye, and this was a variation on one he’d read about, so he could get through it without embarrassing himself. “The memories you’ve been telling me about are almost all from the Founders’ time. Do the floors and the walls and the furniture remember them best?”

“They loved them,” said Luna simply. She halted in place, turned in a half-circle, and bowed to the couple next to them, who, Harry was amused to see, were Hermione and Zacharias. “They built Hogwarts, after all. Of course Hogwarts is going to love them.”

“What’s she babbling about now?” Zacharias looked extremely irritated as he stepped out of the dance to take his place as Luna’s temporary partner. Harry, moving across from Hermione, was about to retort, but Luna got there before he could.

“Do you have clumsy feet?” she asked, frowning at him. “The floor is complaining because it says you step too heavily.”

Harry muffled his laughter in his sleeve as Zacharias shut up and retreated into proper pureblood coolness, leading Luna through the steps that she and Harry had just performed, in reverse order. Harry offered his hand to Hermione, and she nodded at him and slid easily into place. She’s probably studied this, Harry thought, as Hermione refused to make a stumble, even when he did.

“You look lovely,” he complimented her, because it was true. Hermione had gone to some trouble with the cosmetic charms that girls like Parvati used far more often. She’d straightened her hair, too, and Harry did wonder why she’d done that. Curls were perfectly fine. “And I’m sorry for what Luna said to Zacharias. I hope that he won’t take it out on you.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione. “And he deserved it. He’s been a perfect gentleman to me all evening, but Merlin, he’s an idiot sometimes.” She rolled her eyes as she and Harry wheeled apart from each other in the finger-touching motion. “Did you know he told me, in all seriousness, that he doesn’t see what purpose most of the pureblood dances serve, because anyone worth a Sickle knows he’s more intelligent than they are?”

Harry snorted, and changed it to a cough as Zacharias glanced over suspiciously at them. “That sounds like him,” he said.

Hermione nodded with a frown. “That’s the thing I like and despise about him most, really.” She leaned back, and Harry spun her. “It’s refreshing to be with someone who knows what I’m talking about and doesn’t make fun of me for studying all the time, but he thinks that makes us better than other people. When I try to say that no, it doesn’t, he has very logical arguments on why it does.”

“I have to admit, I’m glad that I’m not dating him,” Harry said, and guided Hermione through the first steps of the dance. It was harder than it looked, doing them backward, and both of them had to concentrate. “Good luck, I suppose.”

“Thank you.” Hermione nodded to him and moved back to Zacharias, who took her arm possessively the moment she came up next to him. They started what sounded like a muted argument, in which Harry caught “different perspective on the world” several times in the course of a minute.

Not sure if I should wish her good luck or not, Harry thought with something between a grimace and a smile as he and Luna turned to face the next couple, Padma Patil and the girl she’d brought, whom Harry thought was named Marietta something. Happiness might be a better bet.

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“Harry?”

Harry glanced up. Luna had just finished the mince pie he’d brought her from the food table—he’d nodded to Draco as he’d
retrieved it, since Draco appeared to be standing guard over the food, and Draco had brightened considerably—and he wondered if she wanted to dance again.

“I’m going back to the Tower,” she said, and smiled at him. “Thank you for dancing with me. I loved it.”

Harry frowned. “Wait, Luna, let me take you—“

Luna shook her head. “You need to get to your meeting.”

Harry stared at her.

Luna gave him a patient smile. “Harry,” she said, “the walls told me.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek, then wandered towards the door. Harry stood up to watch her go, at least partially to make sure that no one thought it would be funny to trip her or snatch one of the ribbons from her hat.

That was how he happened to have a direct line-of-sight view of Ron yelling at Ginny and Blaise, his face red as a radish, though Harry couldn’t catch everything he said in the general buzz of music and talk. From what Connor had told him, “slimy Slytherin” would figure quite prominently. Harry frowned. If I went over there and challenged him to repeat that to me, would he? Would he have cared if Ginny had asked me?

He also got to see Ginny draw her wand from inside one lacy sleeve and cast a spell at Ron. It him squarely, and he paused for a moment, then clawed frantically at his nose.

Harry knew what hex she’d used when a bat began attacking Ron’s face. Harry rolled his eyes. Bat-Bogey. Well, he got what was coming to him. If he’d just shut up about it in public, I don’t think Ginny would have felt the need to do that.

The use of magic caused most people to fall silent and stare, so Harry could easily hear Professor McGonagall’s shocked, “Miss Weasley!” and Ginny’s disgusted, “I suppose that you want to be known as the Boy Who Lived To Be An Immature Prat, then.”

She turned sharply away from Ron and took Blaise’s arm again. Blaise was grinning like an idiot, Harry saw. Ron was already out the door.

Harry caught Draco’s eye and tilted his head. Draco nodded and came over to him. “My father said he would meet us beyond the rose gardens,” he murmured. “I know a side door that goes there without passing through the places where everyone’ll be snogging.”

Harry nodded back, and followed him. Most people were too involved in laughing or dancing to notice them, and the professors seemed focused on the drama of McGonagall attempting to get Ginny to stop dancing with Blaise so she could scold her properly.

Draco led Harry to a far corner of the Great Hall and slipped out a door that Harry had noticed before, but supposed vaguely must be for house elves or something. In a moment, they were out in the rose gardens, and Harry shook his head and sniffed in gratitude. Much as he’d enjoyed listening to Luna, the Hall had been growing too hot, and too filled with stares, for his comfort.

“This way,” Draco whispered, and they slipped off among the rosebushes, avoiding any places that giggled.

Harry felt his mind calming and becoming cooler as if to match the air, though he cast a few warming charms on his face so that his cheeks wouldn’t get the same idea. He was absolutely sure that he knew what Lucius was going to ask for. Luckily, it wasn’t something he was at all reluctant to grant. He wondered what else the end of the truce-dance would involve beyond the exchange of gifts, though. Most books didn’t talk much about that, as if afraid they would profane something so sacred with their words.

“Here we are.”

Harry blinked and looked up. They’d reached the wall of the garden, and Draco was running a hand along the stone, his face seeming all frown in the faint light from the Great Hall. “Yes,” he said after a moment. “Here it is. Father and Mother used to use this way to sneak out of the school in his seventh year.”
“Why?” Harry asked, thinking that it would have been easier to go through the Entrance Hall.

Draco gave him a swift look, and his voice turned dry. “Harry, believe me, I really wasn’t interested in asking.”

Harry flushed. “That wasn’t what I meant,” he muttered, but Draco was already tugging at the gate.

A moment later, he muttered, “What the hell?”

Harry came up beside him, glad to have something to think about other than Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy sneaking out of Hogwarts. “What do you mean?” he asked, but when he laid his hand on the gate, he realized what it must be. There was a powerful magical force holding it shut, and it didn’t feel like a ward or a shield. It felt like the result of a ritual. Harry pushed at it.

A question formed in his mind—not spoken, but written, as though someone were actively reaching into and writing it on his thoughts. Do you wish to pass?

Harry blinked. Yes, he answered, wondering if it could really be that simple.

You are certain?

I am.

There is no longer a prohibition?

There is not, Harry replied, wondering if perhaps this was a spell put on the school to discourage people from coming in during the war with Voldemort.

A wind appeared to sigh, and the words were wiped out of his mind. Harry nodded to Draco, and Draco pulled the gate open.

A single figure waited beyond the gate for them. Harry could make out it was a witch from the shape of the robes, and hesitated. He hadn’t realized Narcissa would be there.

Draco took a step forward. “Mum—“

The woman cast the hood of her cloak back and rolled her sleeves at the same time, sending a small globe filled with light into one of her palms, so that they could see her face. When he saw it, Harry was certain that the light had already been lit, as she could not have managed the spell.

Lily gazed at him, and said, “Hello, Harry.”

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: A Dark Lord Will Be Along Any Minute Now

Albus looked down from the window in his office, charmed to reflect the view of the gate through the rose-gardens as it was at the moment, and waited, and hoped.

He had thought of having Lily come to the school long before, but it was not until he had begun listening seriously to the wards of Hogwarts, which he usually ignored unless there was a diamond-hard reason not to, that he realized what an opportunity Lucius Malfoy’s visit represented. He had been aware when the Dark wizards visited Harry on Halloween night, but he hadn’t bothered to listen to their conversations through the wards, sure he would hear only Slytherin games that they played with the poor unsuspecting boy. But when the wards reported to him that Harry and Draco Malfoy were speaking of his father’s second visit, Albus’s interest had been peaked.

Then Draco, in a private conversation with Severus, had mentioned that Lucius would wait outside the gate in the rose-gardens that he had used when he was a student at the school, and that he would be there on the night of the Yule Ball.

Albus had seen his opportunity.
He had had Lily send a letter to her son, with a warning in it if he had cared to read it, but he suspected Harry wouldn’t—and even if he had, his only chance to avoid this confrontation would have been to come to the Headmaster at once and have it in Albus’s office instead. He had told Lily to wait at the rose-garden gate until Harry came through, to provide a barrier between her and Harry that would let the justice ritual try to prevent them from seeing each other. Harry would remove the prohibition so that he and Draco could get through the gate, and then the rest would be simple enough.

Lucius, meanwhile, was somewhat occupied with the trees of the Forbidden Forest, which Albus had stirred unexpectedly to life when he passed them—such feats were not beyond the Headmaster of Hogwarts, though they tired him and he preferred to accomplish his ends through subtler means—and would not be along for some time. Severus had agreed to let Harry go to the meeting alone.

Albus had not anticipated that the young Malfoy heir would be with Harry, somehow having missed that detail, but he would not let it bother him. Harry would have no choice about speaking to Lily now.

And when he heard what she had to say, he would have no choice about surrendering, either.

Albus settled back, tightened his control on the trees, and watched the drama playing out below, which would change and affect the fate of the wizarding world in leading Harry back more closely to the Light.

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Harry felt his heart throbbing so hard that he shook. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think of what to do, couldn’t concentrate on anything but the sensation of his heart in his ears, it was so overwhelming.

Then he felt a second sensation—Draco’s hand slipping into his.

And though he would have preferred to face Lily alone, in his fear of what would emerge now, Harry grasped the hand and squeezed back.

“Harry?” Lily’s face remained grave and quiet as she held the light-globe higher so that she could see him, but her voice echoed her disappointment. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

Harry swallowed, intending the gesture to take his nervousness with it. He didn’t think he succeeded, but he only sounded as if he’d been kicked in the stomach when he spoke, instead of half-disemboweled. “Not particularly, no. I said that I never wanted to communicate with you again. How much more of a hint can you take?”

“But you responded to my first letter.” Lily moved a step forward, the hem of her robe sweeping the ground. Harry could not control the urge to take a step back, and Draco immediately moved close to his side and angled half in front of him, as if he would protect Harry at all costs from his own mother. “And you did not say that you wished never to communicate again in your last response. You only said that you gave your consent to that?” Her voice had turned into the same sort of gentle scolding that Harry remembered from nights when he was proud of something he had done and wanted to tell Connor about it. She shouldn’t have had to remind him to keep his training secret, but she did, sometimes.

She shouldn’t have had to remind you how much she loves you, either.

“No, Harry,” said Draco sharply.

Harry turned his eyes from his mother’s face to his friend’s, though it was hard. Draco had been too shocked to say anything at first—his face still showed pale in Lily’s light—but his eyes were rapidly filling with tears. He reached out and grasped Harry’s throat, hard enough to hurt.

“I know what your guilt feels like,” he breathed. “It fills my mouth with oil. And I won’t let you feel it, Harry. I won’t. You have nothing to feel guilty for. She treated you horribly, and she deserves everything she got.” He turned and glanced over his shoulder at Lily, and Harry shivered. He hadn’t known that Draco could feel such hatred as his expression said he did. “And I know you won’t believe this,” he muttered, “but she deserves worse than that.”

“I don’t see that you have any place here.” Lily pointed off to the side. “This is between myself and my son. Go.”
“No,” said Draco, and this time shoved Harry completely behind him, so that he could face Lily. “You’ve torn your son apart and scattered his heart to the four winds, the way that Gerra did with Aries Black. You don’t deserve to be anywhere near him. I’m going to give you twenty seconds to leave before I cast one of the Unforgivables.” He drew his wand. “One. Two.”

“You can’t cast the Unforgivables yet,” said Lily. “You’re not old enough.” As if in a dream, Harry saw her reach into her pocket, but he didn’t know what she could be taking out. She couldn’t use a wand anymore, given her Muggle state. “And I told you before that you don’t have any place in a confrontation between myself and my son. My beloved son, whom I haven’t met for a year and a day.” She gestured to the left with her chin. “Leave, Malfoy.”

“Five. Six.”

Lily’s hand clenched around whatever it was in her pocket.

Harry took a deep breath. He appreciated Draco’s defense of him, but he couldn’t let him suffer, just in case Lily did have a magical weapon with her that she could still use, like the light-globe, because it didn’t require any innate magic. And he didn’t want Draco to hurt his mother, either.

The emotions churned in him, knife-edged and ice-edged, but he knew his overmastering impulse. He wanted his parents to go away. If they chose never to acknowledge him again, if they never sent him another letter, if they simply ignored his existence, then he would be satisfied and do the same for them. He did not want them discussed, or punished, or hurt. What they had done was done. Harry knew them, knew what they could do now, and he pitied them. There was no reason that he need do anything else.

“Draco,” he said, tugging on his arm.

Draco turned his head to look at him, but said, “She’s still not gone. Fifteen. Sixteen.”

Lily’s hand rose out of her pocket, moving, tossing something at Draco.

Harry had always been a good Seeker, and he thanked Merlin for it now as he rose in a gentle leap and caught the flying object before it could come anywhere near Draco’s face, its likely target. He felt warmth in his palm, and then a sharp sting that coursed up his arm. He grimaced. It was not as bad as the bite of the spiders last year that had incapacitated him badly enough to need the hospital wing, but it hurt.

Harry turned his hand over enough to see what the thing was, but could make out only a shattered red shell before Draco said, with a coldness that belonged in his father’s voice and not his own, “Crucio.”

No spell flew, though Harry did see a gleam of something around Draco’s wand. He jerked to his feet, disregarding the fact that it would already have been too late if Draco’s curse had really worked. Lily laughed softly.

“You don’t hate me enough to cast that curse on me,” she told Draco. “Could it be that you really understand how matters stand between my son and I?” She paused for a moment and cocked her head to the side. “You have a mother of your own. Can you imagine what she would feel if someone tried to interfere with your reconciliation with her?”

Draco didn’t bother answering her, as if he thought Lily’s words not worth answering. He came over to Harry and turned his hand over, demanding, “Let me see.”

A moment later, he shrieked and swatted hard. Harry looked down as bits of red shell fell to the ground, and blinked. Still-Beetle. Of course. I should have realized it. We’ve used the shells in Potions before.

Then he went completely still, paralyzed along the path of the shell’s venom. Draco tugged at his arm, but Harry didn’t even sway. Lily let out an annoyed breath and came a few steps nearer to him.

“Harry,” she said softly. “I suppose this is one way of getting you to listen. Just listen.”

Harry couldn’t do anything but stare at her, but Draco made a sound somewhere between a snarl and a moan and lifted his wand.
Lily lobbed something else at him. Harry couldn’t turn his head to follow the path of the trajectory and see what it was, and though he struggled, his wandless magic was as much affected by the stillness as the rest of him was, since he’d bound it to his body. He heard the muffled thump of Draco slumping to the ground, and hoped that he would be all right.

“There,” said Lily. “Albus gave those to me just in case I encountered any resistance on the way, but really, I didn’t think I’d have to use one of them on your friend. We were supposed to meet alone.” She stared hard at Harry for a moment, and then her voice softened. “I hoped I wouldn’t have to use one on you, either. I wrote you in my letter that I was coming.”

Harry had never read the letter. He tried to convey that with his eyes, since he didn’t have any other way to say it. This was worse than the stillness caused by the Body-Bind spell. At least there, he knew movement was possible, if someone else levitated or dragged him. This felt as if he were rooted to the ground.

“Finally, we can speak without interruption.” Lily took a deep breath. “Harry, I know that I haven’t been the best of mothers. But I have made you what you are, and for that, you owe me a hearing.

“I did what I did for the sake of the wizarding world surviving the second war with Voldemort. You know that. I don’t need to explain my reasoning to you. But I have thought of a new way to phrase it since that you might appreciate: if Voldemort wins, everything about the wizarding world dies, not just Connor. Your allies will die, since they are no longer loyal to him, and he does not tolerate anything but instant obedience. Your friends will die. Your guardian will die. Your House will be trampled into the mud, tainted with darkness everlasting, and if you think people speak badly of Slytherin now, you don’t want to hear what they’ll say when the Light wins again. Slytherin would be synonymous with evil, and no one would ever be Sorted into that House again. I think they’d dissolve it, or close Hogwarts, rather than allow anyone else to go into the House of the Snake.

“That means that everything new you’ve found in life would be destroyed. And that’s unacceptable for you, I would think.” She paused as if expecting some response from him, some nod or word, but then seemed to remember he was stilled. She shook her head and went on. Harry was pleading with her in his head to shut up, while his magic raced around inside the barrier of the stillness looking for some way out, but she couldn’t hear him.

“It’s unacceptable to the boy I raised, I know, the boy who loved Connor and who’s transferred that love elsewhere. And that means that we have to build a new relationship, you and me and Albus. We’re the only ones who truly understand the meaning of sacrifice, Harry. He’s made the hard decisions that are needed to win this war. I’ve made hard decisions of my own. And you’ve walked the most difficult way.”

Lily put out one hand and smoothed it gently over his hair, making Harry’s scalp feel as if it were crawling with insects. “We’ll need Connor, but he won’t ever understand the meaning of sacrifice the way we do. I regret that. If I’d known he was a potential savior in the prophecy, I would have raised him that way. He would have understood that he might die, and what heroism and sacrifice and hard roads meant. But it’s too late to recover him now. Albus has been testing him, but he doesn’t think he’s really made of the best stuff.”

Harry thought he felt a finger twitch, and sent his magic down to it as hard as he could. But the motion wasn’t repeated. He remembered Snape saying of Still-Beetles that they used to be used to bind powerful Dark wizards while they awaited their trials. Usually, the courtroom was built around them. He could understand why, now. Movement was becoming a foreign concept to him.

“You’re the best choice for savior,” said Lily, her eyes soft. “But Albus knows that pushing you into the forefront of the world would just make you uncomfortable. You haven’t dealt well with the attention that you’ve received from your exploits so far, have you? No, you haven’t. That’s the boy I raised. So we’ll leave Connor as the Boy-Who-Lived, and bring you back behind the scenes and behind the shadows. It’ll be different, I promise. You’ll have all my love, and all my attention. Wouldn’t you like that, Harry? We’ll build a relationship, and we’ll reconcile with James, and it will be like what it was in Godric’s Hollow—except better, because this time you’ll be at the center of things, and not just pushed off into the shadows.” Her face was glowing with love and hope.

Harry could feel what it would be like, and the picture was horribly tempting to one part of him. Last year, when Connor was fighting him and his father was missing and his guilt over what he had done to his mother was at its peak, he didn’t think he could have resisted the temptation.

But he had changed, even if his mother wanted to pretend that he hadn’t. He couldn’t give up the friends he had, the allies he’d made, the promises he wanted to keep and the vates duties that he loved most out of all the roads he had to walk. He
couldn’t give up Draco, and he couldn’t give up Snape. He wanted someone who would love him without any other obligations, he couldn’t deny that, and there was no doubt that he would understand the kind of household Lily was talking about better than he had ever understood his own clumsy attempts to live a normal life. There was familiarity in that, knowledge that could breed longing.

But that was the only safety it offered, and what he had said under Veritaserum was true. He didn’t feel safe with James and Lily, and he sincerely believed that he never would again.

His eyes must have conveyed his rejection, because Lily began abruptly to cry.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Albus told me—and your letters said—” She blinked, and the tears fell from her eyes and tracked down her face, glimmering in the light of the globe she held. “Your letters said that you understood what I’d done for you, that you were what I made you.”

Yes. I said that. But I’ve still changed, even if I have a bigger circle of people to care for now than Connor. And your skills let me lure in more people like that.

Lily took a deep breath. “Forgive me, Harry,” she said. “You’ll understand when I’m done why I must say such cutting words, harder than any words I’ve had to say before.”

She rose, and her face assumed a look that would have made Harry flinch if he could move. That look was from the Bad Days, as he called them in his imagination. Those were the days when he said or did something that convinced Lily he didn’t realize that his first duty was always to be to Connor, and she had to speak the truths she normally hid behind soft words.

“You are what I made you,” Lily whispered. “You are all that I made you. Harry. Every bit of knowledge you have, every bit of skill that you possess, came from me. Your inborn magic is something that I can’t take credit for, of course, and neither are the unnatural additions that Voldemort made to it.” She paused, then mused aloud, “Yes, you know about that now, so I can tell you.

“I was so pleased with you when you were born, Harry. And Connor too, of course, but in those days we didn’t know that there was to be any substantial difference between you, so I felt proud of you both just the same. And I played with you and sang to you and laughed with you and nursed you, and thought that I would never be happier than I was just then, with my two perfect children.”

Perfection is an illusion, Harry thought, in a desperate attempt to find something that would let him release his magic or distract him from Lily’s words. One that you and Draco share.

“And then Albus told me about what we must do, and I was devastated, but what could I do?” Lily drew in a breath thick with tears. “We had to do it, for the good of the world. Albus had taught James and me about sacrifice when we were still students at school, and we’d seen a good bit of it when we fought with the Order of the Phoenix. We couldn’t fail to do our part.

“We came back after that night, and even before Albus told me what I had to do, I knew. You were different from your brother now, Harry. I could feel the increased magic around you. It was frightening. It was alien; no baby was supposed to have magic that strong, and you hadn’t been born with it, which is the natural, correct, proper way for magic to come into the world.” She swallowed. “And it was perverse, Harry. Filthy. It was like bathing in dog vomit every time I was near you.”

Harry couldn’t close his eyes, couldn’t turn them from her. All he could do was stand there and feel as if his mind were lacerated, while his magic raced screaming around his body.

“You’ve never felt it,” Lily whispered. “You live in the midst of it, and you can’t feel how it affects other people. But, believe me, all the reactions you get have disgust at the bottom. They might be morbid fascination, or a temptation to see how deep the perversion runs, or an attraction to that kind of obscenity, because their magic feels the same way. But it’s never because they admire your magic. I’m sorry if they’ve told you so. They don’t know its true nature, then, or they want to console you and make you feel better, or they want something from you. But you are another Voldemort since your magic was released from the phoenix web.”

Harry’s sight dimmed as he remembered the justice ritual that Voldemort had corrupted in May, attempting to use it to drain his magic from Harry. His power was what the Dark Lord had wanted. Could there really be a doubt that it was dirty, then,
and not just plentiful? Would Voldemort have an attraction to anything that was inherently pure and of the Light?

And if he was another Voldemort, then did that mean that he would do the same kinds of things as Voldemort did someday, attacking children and corrupting ancient pureblood rituals into his service?

“But my training took that away,” said Lily. “It made you safe, for a long time. You didn’t use the filthy part of your magic. You used the clean part, the natural part, with just a bit of the filth leaking in from time to time, and being cleansed as it came, like offal being washed in a flowing stream. Had the bindings on your magic lasted until the time of your last year at Hogwarts, or even a bit earlier, then the darkness would have all turned to light.

“But it didn’t, and now you’re full of the vomit again, and whatever good is in you—the history that you know, the love that you have for your brother and other people, the skills that I taught you to defend and heal—you owe to me. Without me, you would have been another Voldemort by the time you were six.”

Harry tried to swallow, and the Still-Beetle venom prevented that. It didn’t prevent blinking, but it prevented everything else, and the screaming mental chaos in his head, which felt as though it were ripping apart his rationalizations piece by piece, was not still enough.

What if she’s right? It’s true that most of the people who’ve professed to like and follow you are only doing it because of things that Lily instilled in you. You would have nothing to offer them if not for your knowledge and your talents, and the sheer power of your magic is something unnatural. Peter called you Voldemort’s magical heir, the heir of the worst Dark Lord of this century. Who wants that? Who will follow that? Who will follow what you are, if it’s all true? Who would like you or love you or pay you deference, if they knew what Lily knows?

“I can still love you, Harry,” Lily whispered. “I know it all, and still I love you, and still I won’t turn from you in disgust. We can cleanse the darkness from you. We can wash you in absolute, utter, shining purity. A mother’s love, and a father’s, too, can do that, you know.”

What if she’s right? What soul do you have that she did not give you? After all, who loves or likes or approves of someone like you without some kind of external reason to do so? And she was the one who taught you to love unconditionally, to accept anything from others—that same forgiveness they’re willing to become your allies for—and taught you to sacrifice—something the others refuse to understand, and indeed say is wrong. No, she won’t make you safe, but she’ll make you honest. No one else has told you any of this. Draco and Snape either know it and keep you in the dark because of it, because they want to protect you, or they don’t know it and they’ll be shocked and appalled beyond reason to find out what you are. Draco’s probably appalled, lying there right now and listening to it. How could you have thought that you were the kind of person who was really capable of receiving the kind of love they wanted to give? Not the Dark Lord’s magical heir, full of the power that the Dark Lord learned from obscenity and murder.

“It’ll be better when you’re back at Godric’s Hollow, Harry,” Lily whispered coaxingly. “There’s no one there but people who want to help you, people whose purity you can bathe in. There’s no one as perverse and cruel there as Voldemort is, or as your friend on the ground is.”

It took Harry a moment to work out that she was talking about Draco.

Draco isn’t perverse and cruel.

The truth froze the chaos inside his mind, and then cracked it, piece by piece, like black ice. What roared up from beneath that, silent, was the same dark rage that had come over him when he confronted Umbridge and Fudge in the Minister’s interrogation room.

She has no right to say that about him.

The explosion of his magic cracked the Still-Beetle venom and made his body wrench violently as it flew out of him. Harry had it under control in a moment, though, because it was his own, just like his rage. As it circled his body, he wondered if it was true that it felt filthy and corrupt to other people.

And then he didn’t care, because he was focusing on Lily, and hearing again what she had said about Draco, a horrible lie in a welter of might-be-truths, and she was lying, and she had to know she was lying, and she had no right to say that, and he wanted to make her hurt.
This time, the snake didn’t flow from his body. It grew on the grass behind Lily, and it lunged forward, closing its jaws around her foot. It had no need to crush her ankle, or pump poison into her. Where it bit, the ankle was simply and suddenly gone, cut away from her body as smoothly as though she had been born without one.

Lily let out a cry and collapsed to the ground, her foot clinging to her leg by the barest strip of flesh. She stared up at him, and her fear made her eyes greener. Harry found that he admired the effect. He moved a few steps forward, never looking away from her face, though his mind was busy deciding where his snake, which was swaying behind Lily in silent obedience to his wishes, should strike next.

It was so simple, here, so wild. He understood what the music he’d heard on the thestral’s back had been singing about. Why not give himself to the Dark? He could have all the filthy magic that he liked then, and no one would care. And Dark Lords and Ladies were famous for not giving a damn if anyone loved them, so he wouldn’t have to worry about whether or not everyone around him was lying to him, at least lies of omission. And he could do whatever he wanted to people who were like Lily, and wanted to hurt Draco or Snape or Connor or someone else he cared about.

“Harry.”

Because the voice was not a shout, because it was low and not raised, Harry stopped, and turned around. Snape was coming across the grass towards them.

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Snape had seen the boys leave the Ball for their meeting, and he had not gone after them. He had no desire to meet Lucius or Narcissa, should she be there. He would wait until midnight and then fetch Draco and Harry if they weren’t back, but otherwise, he trusted them to handle themselves.

He first knew his mistake when the strongest explosion of Dark magic he’d ever felt burst free beyond the walls, and sent him to his knees.

He stood up again as soon as he could, though his mind was oppressed as though with a cloud and his knees wobbled. His mind and his ears both echoed with screams. The last came from students and professors who had any magical sensitivity, confused and frightened. The first came from magic in the area, as it turned tortured with the hatred and pain of a powerful wizard.

Harry can swallow magic. It’s already moving towards him.

Not that he ever really doubted that the Dark magic was Harry, of course. If Voldemort had returned, the Mark on his arm would already be burning.

He staggered out of the Hall by the same door the boys had taken—in the opposite direction from all the other professors, who were trying to herd the students to safety—and towards the gate Draco had told him about, moving mechanically. The garden was full of frightened and crying children, some of them clutching each other for comfort. Snape ignored all of them, though he forced away one young girl who would have clung to his robes with a snarl. He was trying to save all their lives by getting to Harry.

Not really, his conscience, which had been suspiciously active the last few days, pointed out. You’re really trying just to save Harry.

Snape shrugged to himself and pushed open the gate.

It was worse the closer he was to it. Snape could feel the Darkness of this magic now. It was not deceptive, nor especially solitary, nor compulsive. It was wild—at once the definition of Dark that probably made the most sense, and the most dangerous. This was the kind of wildness that would strike at friends as well as foes, if the wild creature was hurt enough.

Snape came out of the gate, and recognized the woman lying on the ground, and saw Draco insensible, and saw black fire burning on Harry’s body, dancing up and down the skin.

“Harry.” He murmured the name, but it would be enough, and started walking towards Harry. It was the bravest thing he had
ever done in his life, he thought.

Harry turned.

His eyes were utterly feral. He had some control left, given the way he could focus on Snape, but that wasn’t long for this world. And then, Snape thought, almost amazed he could be so calm while thinking this, neither would they be.

He stopped well short of Harry. He had often thought his charge was like a wild animal, the way he flinched and shied from most gestures of affection. He would use the same mindset now to coax him.

“Harry,” he repeated. Then he drew his wand. Harry tensed, and the black fire on his arms reached out, flickering. Snape could feel its coldness from here, and sense the way the air surged towards it. Whatever went into that blackness would not come out again.

Snape laid his wand on the ground. Then he knelt beside it—both knees, without the one-kneed gesture that would show deference and might enrage Harry by its nearness to the gesture given Light Lords—and held out his arms.

He saw a fine tremor enter the black fire around Harry, even if Harry himself wasn’t shaking. The gesture awakened memories in him, then, memories of the Wizengamot’s courtroom. That was what Snape was counting on.

He drove away anger and confusion and hatred as he met Harry’s gaze. There was already enough of that in the boy who needed a step or two more to become a Dark Lord. He took a deep breath, because this was hard for him, too, but his surliness about showing his emotions could not be allowed to rule his mood now, and let himself show his love.

Harry shuddered so hard that for a moment, Snape thought he would sink to the ground.

Then a movement off to the side drew his attention. Draco had recovered from whatever weapon Lily had used on him, and had rolled over to one side. He froze when he saw Harry, but his expression in the light was not the terror that Snape himself had feared. He simply gave Harry the look he’d been giving him lately, the one that combined ferocity and pride and love, and waited.

Harry closed his eyes.

Snape waited. They both waited, and for an intolerable moment, the air outside the garden was tight with magic and expectation.

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Harry had been prepared to destroy—not only Lily, but his relationship with everyone else left behind him. Why not? It was all lies anyway. Or maybe not, but he couldn’t trust them again. How could he trust them? The fact that his rage had come out like this, that he wanted to hurt people, only meant he couldn’t be trusted, and no one would want to be friends with someone who was a sadist like Bellatrix. He might as well step away now and make all their dislikes come true.

And Snape and Draco were both waiting, and not running, or calling him names, or casting binding curses on him.

But she said—

But they were there.

But your magic is filthy—

But they were there.

But you know that she could be right—

But they were there.

But you weren’t born with your magic—
But they were there.

Harry’s mind kept bringing up words, and every time, they collapsed before the implacable actions that Snape and Draco kept presenting him with.

With a little cry, he pulled his magic back inside his body. His rage was not so easy to lock away, but he kept his back turned on his mother and his focus trained on Snape and Draco.

One mentor and one friend. They both loved him, for whatever wild and stupid reasons they had, and he could not prove them wrong, after all.

He swallowed, and crept back towards Draco. Draco was on his feet in an instant, hugging him, gently. He didn’t hold hard enough that Harry might be tempted to break free. Harry lifted his arms and held him back, desperately.

Snape’s hands came down on his shoulders then, and he murmured, “What shall I do with her?”

“Send her away,” Harry whispered, not looking up from where he had his face buried in Draco’s shoulder. It was nice. It was warm. Draco smelled good. He didn’t see why he should have to see anything right now. “Please. I know you want to hurt her, but I just—I don’t care. Call Madam Pomfrey and take her to the hospital wing so that they can heal her foot. I can’t try to take it back, or I’ll kill her.”

Hot shame was washing him now, that he had that desire for pain inside him and had caused Lily’s soft sobs. But at least he knew himself well enough to know that he couldn’t turn around right now. At least there was that much.

Snape was silent for a moment, then said, “As you wish.” Harry heard him mutter the incantation for a message spell, and the silvery flutter of one of them sped away to summon Madam Pomfrey. “Harry,” he said then. “Do you feel strong enough to continue to your meeting with Lucius Malfoy, or should we return to the castle?”

Harry felt a surge of gratitude. Snape was trusting him by asking, just as he had trusted Harry to know what was best with Lily, and wasn’t giving in to his own inclinations to hurt her.

“I want to go on,” he whispered. “Tonight is the end of the truce-dance. I—that’s going to make me feel better, because it’s such powerful, ancient magic. And I don’t want to go to bed or anything, anyway. I want to stay with the two of you.”

Draco whispered, “Good. I couldn’t let go of you this soon.”

Snape sighed. “Let us find Lucius,” he said, and guided Harry and Draco around in a careful half-circle, so that they would neither have to separate nor look at Lily. The mere thought of looking at her made Harry shiver in shock, and Draco tighten his hold on him.

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At his window, Albus Dumbledore leaned his forehead on the glass and shut his eyes in utter despair.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine: Dark Yule

Harry knew that he could collapse if he let himself. There were too many thoughts in his head. They were drifting in bladed circles that would spring open in swords in a few moments, and pierce him.

If he let them. If he concentrated on what his mother had said, on the things that had just happened to him.

But he didn’t want to. Even when he lifted his head from Draco’s shoulder, he only looked ahead, and not back, and let Snape guide them along the path of the Forbidden Forest by the light of his wand. Now and then Snape reached out to touch his shoulder, and Harry made himself appreciate the touch without thinking about why Snape felt it necessary to give it.

Draco’s arm around his shoulder, and the shoulder pressed against his side, as if Draco wanted them to blend into one being, were even more comforting. Harry used them to leap from moment to moment, to coax and urge his thoughts along past that
moment of most danger, until he was sure that he could have walked on his own. He still didn’t let Draco go, though, or tug himself free. This time, it was because he didn’t want to, rather than because he needed the support.

He knew what he would have to do when this meeting with Lucius had finished. He wondered if he should be alone, but then dismissed that. No, he would want to have Snape and Draco with him for that. Besides, if he left either of them alone this evening, he thought there was a high chance they would go into the hospital wing after Lily.

Harry didn’t want her hurt more than she was. It was the end. It should have been the end a year ago, when he had taken her magic. He had been a fool to agree to answering the letter in the first place.

*You didn’t know who it was from then.*

But he could have suspected, and avoided this, if he’d been just a bit smarter.

Well, now he was. He was going to close off that part of his life. That meant that he wouldn’t hurt his mother further, and he would not let anyone else hurt her, either. Let her cease to exist to him, as much as though she had died when he was born. He need no longer remember what she had said to him.

The trees ran out ahead of them, and then they came to a halt in a wide clearing that Harry supposed must be the place. Snape halted, at least, and glanced at Draco, who nodded.

Harry stared around inquiringly. The place seemed familiar, though he couldn’t make out the similarity until he turned around and saw an arch of branches against the moon. He remembered those branches.

*This is the clearing where Connor and I fought the Dark Lord in first year.*

Harry gave a violent shiver, and Draco cast a warming charm on him without being asked, drawing a little away to do so. Harry gave him a faint smile. “Thank you,” he said, and Draco’s gaze sharpened as his voice limped and croaked.

“Harry—“

“Ah, Potter,” said Lucius’s voice. “And Draco. And Severus. I did not expect you, at least, to join us, Severus.”

“Lucius.” Harry turned around in time to see Snape incline his head. The expression on his face wasn’t quite visible, but his voice was laden with irony. “What can I say? Circumstances change.”

“They certainly do,” Lucius said. Harry realized he must have been at the other side of the clearing, under the trees there. His robes were starred with snow, and so was his hair, which he’d left free of his cloak. He turned his head, and his eyes gleamed in the wand-light as they fastened on Harry. Harry almost thought he saw a faint tightening around their corners, but it vanished at once, and anything could have caused it. “Mr. Potter. I brought some other people with me. I thought they would want to witness the end of our truce-dance, and they wish to present you with gifts.”

Harry stiffened and lifted his head. “No former Death Eaters except the ones who are already allied with me, I hope, Lucius?”

Lucius laughed, a sound as sharp and cold as the wind on Harry’s cheeks. “Not at all, Mr. Potter. Hawthorn is here, and Adalrico, and Elfride, though she begs your pardon for not standing. Walking at this stage of the pregnancy is difficult for her.” He held out a hand, and another figure stepped forward from the shadows to take his fingers. “And, of course, Narcissa is here, as you might have suspected she would be.”

Harry resolved not to show dismay. He had thought this gift-giving ceremony would be private. He bowed to Narcissa. “Mrs. Malfoy,” he said. “I’m sorry, but I did not bring a gift for you, or for the other guests.” He had sent one to her already, a book of poetry by a witch who had written some of the books on her library shelves.

Narcissa smiled at him, though it vanished when Harry moved a step forward and she could see his face. Harry told himself sternly not to flinch. If they could see some kind of change on his features, they were still unlikely to remark on it. “Harry,” she said. “I received your beautiful book of poetry. Thank you. And I think you have misunderstood the nature of our coming here. It is not often a truce-dance is completed, and much less one such as this one, between a Declared Dark wizard and one who is not Dark. We wished to congratulate you, and to give you gifts. We ask for no return, however. In fact, we demand none.”
Harry felt his chest tighten. He could think of only a few times and places in wizarding history when it would be appropriate not to give gifts to a powerful wizard. One of them was the formation of a cadre of guards or companions who would make sure that the powerful wizard was not exposed to danger while he attended to the business of Light or Dark.

“I am not a Lord,” he said quietly.

Narcissa smiled at him. “We know that,” she said. “And we don’t want you to be, Harry, or to Declare for Light or Dark. No matter which you chose, your choice would disappoint some of your allies. You are already reaching out across both chasms. I received a letter from Tybalt Starrise the other day, saluting me and asking formal permission to consider himself a friend of my family. He thought he should, since he is aware that you and I are in close alliance.”

“How?” Harry asked in bewilderment. Tybalt hadn’t even sent him a formal salutation as yet, much less seemed aware of the way that Harry was joined to the Malfoys. Now, Harry had to wonder how much his manipulation in the Forbidden Forest had really fooled the son of Starrise after all.

Narcissa shook her head slightly, her smile brilliant. “Many people saw us that day we visited the Ministry after your kidnapping, Harry. It is becoming known. And now you will have people reaching out to you, asking permission for formal alliances. And your allies must get to know each other, of course. What good will it be for you if they do not?”

Harry bowed his head, a bit overwhelmed. Trying to match this happening with the ideas that his mother had given him, that people would only gather around him because they had vile magic or wanted something from him—

He stopped his thoughts and slid them under the pool of quicksilver. Draco had already noticed the swift burst of emotion, and slid close to him, one hand reaching out to clasp Harry’s. Harry nodded to him in gratitude, then faced Narcissa again.

“There’s still no need for you to dedicate yourselves to me the way that the Death Eaters dedicated themselves to—” He choked, unable to say the name Voldemort just yet, after thinking how much like him he was.

“We aren’t doing that,” said Narcissa. “We can’t be doing that, because you aren’t a Lord.” She winked at Harry, as if the logic made everything better. “We’re simply forming the core of a counterforce, one that will fight the Death Eaters who go back to him, and Dumbledore’s Order of the Phoenix. Rosier’s attack the other day, and similar attacks on Hawthorn and Adalrico—both of which failed—taught us that truth. You need us organized, Harry, not scattered and acting alone and apart any more. So we shall become part of an organization this night. We will give you gifts that symbolize that commitment. If you give them back to us, or do something for us in return, then you’ll be rejecting our allegiance. So please don’t do that.” She ended with a little curtsey that Harry decided was all right. He had bowed to her, after all.

“All right,” he said, swallowing hard.

Narcissa nodded to him, and then turned and gestured to the trees. Harry saw an odd shadow floating out to meet them. He understood what it was—a levitating chair—only when he made out Elfrida’s shape reclining in it.

She smiled at him. Harry had seen some pregnant women who looked absolutely miserable, but, seven months gone, Millicent’s mother only looked radiantly happy. She didn’t even appear heavy, more as if her body had changed into some beautiful creature capable of protecting both herself and Marian. Blankets thick with warming charms were tucked around her, and Adalrico stood behind the litter, beaming proudly.

“Hello, Harry,” Elfrida said, holding out a hand. Harry went forward and clasped it, Draco moving closely at his side all the way. “I am glad that you are the one we’re dedicating ourselves to. My commitment will be less extensive than that of the others, of course, because I have the oath to my children that must come first, but whatever I can do for you, I will.”

“Thank you,” said Harry, feeling ridiculously as if he were about to start crying at any second.

Adalrico nodded when he caught Harry’s eye. “You need never worry about my loyalty,” he said, and then laughed. “The Dark Lord made sure of that, when he sent Rabastan Lestrange to kill me.”

Harry scanned him anxiously, but it appeared that he was fine, and had taken no damage from the attack. “What about Hawthorn?” he asked.
“Here, Harry,” said her voice, and she came forward.

Harry studied the pallor of her face with a frown until he remembered that the full moon was only a few days past, and relaxed. Hawthorn sniffed at him, and frowned back. Harry ignored that. He was sure that his scent glamours would hold up, though a werewolf’s nose was strongest in the week on either side of the transformation.

“Who came after you?” he asked.

“Bellatrix.” Hawthorn’s voice gave the words a low, snarling twist that Harry thought was born more of satisfaction than anger. “She went away yelping for her pains, trailing blood from the arm that you had already shortened for her.”

Harry refused to let himself think about taking body parts. He nodded. “And you’re resolved, too, to bind yourself to me?”

Hawthorn caught his eye. Her gaze said clearly that she wasn’t about to let him forget what they’d shared that one Friday she had come to the school. “Yes,” she said, and that was enough.

Harry nodded again, and took a deep breath, and turned to Lucius. “Then we can finish the truce-dance, Mr. Malfoy,” he said.

Lucius could feel a soul-deep thrill racing through his body. The ancient magic had been growing steadily since Potter came into the clearing, and now, with his statement, it was time for the end of the dance.

Lucius was feeling emotions roil up in him now, all the excitement and frustration and anger and wonder of the two years he and Potter had danced this ritual. Even for someone who had Declared for the Dark before he was out of Hogwarts, who had fought beside the Dark Lord in his war, who had danced the pureblood dances almost before he could speak, this was not something that happened often. The truce-dance took a long time, and was fragile in the first stages. Most purebloods trusted to some other kind of ritual to bind them to their enemies, or former enemies. Marriage or joining had done the trick in the older days.

It was the last step of the dance that caused the most consternation in those who used it.

Lucius had anticipated this, though, since the Midsummer day in his house when he and Potter had completed the third step of the dance and he had begun to think that he would see it through to the end. There was only one set of gifts that was fit to end such a sacred and mighty waltz. Potter knew it, too, and his gaze lingered on Lucius’s as both of them backed away to opposite sides of the clearing.

He was not about to refuse or back out.

Lucius’s heart gave one vivid jump, and then the wave of emotions crested and broke. It was as himself that he went forward to meet Potter, feeling young as he had not felt since Draco was born. It made things even better that Severus was here to see this. Severus had shown too much disdain for the pureblood dances at times, as was natural coming from one raised without them.

He strode towards Potter, and the night around him came alive with glittering blue swords of light. The truce-dance tightened around them, and compelled them to finish things. The swords cut above Lucius’s head, and then flashed along beside him as he walked, defining a narrow corridor of which he could not venture. He looked at them once from the corner of his eye, and nodded. They were frost-blue, the blue of shadows on snow. Everything was as it should be.

Potter was walking forward, too, his head up and his steps preternaturally calm. He was no boy, Lucius thought, for all that his age would have said so, and five years ago he would not have been able to envision binding himself to someone this young.

But that was the mistake that Dumbledore had made. Lucius was certain of it. To the old fool, children were pawns and always had been, and he disdained their ability to be more than mindless soldiers. He had underestimated Potter, and badly, and now he would pay part of the price for it.

They met in the middle of the clearing, and the swords escorting Potter and the ones escorting him met and melted together, into a blade of pure power that hovered over their heads. It would fall on their necks should one of them do something to hurt
the other now. That was not going to happen, Lucius thought in amusement as he dropped to one knee. He had never understood the ancient purebloods who had thought that precaution necessary.

Why would someone come this far and then back out? The magic around him was song, was sweet smell, was pleasurable beyond belief. No hatred or desire to betray could survive that.

Potter dropped to one knee in front of him. With all the growing he’d done lately, he wasn’t much shorter than Lucius in this posture. He met Lucius’s eyes, and Lucius saw no trace of wavering in him. He might have been the one who started this dance, but Potter was the one who would finish it.

“No gift is fit to carry the conclusion of a ritual so powerful,” Potter whispered, “but magic itself.”

Lucius nodded. Potter would have known that, of course. But usually, the wizard who gave the gift had the choice of what it would be. Lucius had demanded the right to specify his gift, though, and Potter was going to let him.

“I wish you to give me the power to speak Parseltongue,” Lucius whispered.

Potter nodded. “I thought you would say that,” he murmured, and then reached one hand towards his chest as the blue glow of the sword above them brightened and turned deep green, the color of forest leaves in the darkness. Lucius hid his amusement and curiosity. Potter’s soul was that deep green color, then, primarily. He would have to go back to his books to identify the many meanings that shade could carry.

Potter touched his chest, and long trails of deep green power flowed out of his skin and coiled in his palm. He moved his fingers and blew on them, and the magic drifted towards Lucius, wrapped around him, and sunk in.

Lucius closed his eyes. The magic joined his heartbeat, a second echoed beat, and then settled fully into him. Potter still possessed the power to speak to snakes, of course, but he had shared his gift. Lucius was now the third living Parselmouth in Britain.

Lucius opened his eyes. Potter, understanding what he wanted, had already moved so that the serpent badge on his robes was right in front of Lucius’s eyes.

“A pity that snake will not animate,” Lucius said, and saw Potter’s eyes widen slightly before he smiled back.

“That would be a useful weapon,” he said, and Lucius could hear the others gasping, faintly. Even more faintly, he could make out the sound of the hisses that Potter was actually giving. “Alas, I hardly think the Headmaster would approve of more snakes slithering around Hogwarts.”

Lucius nodded once, satisfied. He had barely admitted to anyone, ever, his admiration of Parselmouths, his wish to be one. Such dreams were for children, and he had not been a child since he was five. It had been the reason he had come to hear the Dark Lord speak in the first place, though not the only reason he had decided to follow him. The languid hissing sliding out of the Dark Lord’s mouth as he conversed with his snakes was a marvel, and to hear snakes respond…

Lucius could not wait until the first time that happened.

He noticed that Potter’s gaze was fixed on him, calmly, patiently, waiting, and he reached towards his own chest. Gray-blue power slipped out and snared his fingers as a solid thing, with a faint cold touch, like mist. He held out his hand to Potter, and Potter clasped it without speaking, as was proper, accepting the gift Lucius offered.

As it happened, Lucius had judged this gift carefully, and he did not think it less valuable than the Parseltongue that Potter had given him, especially since Narcissa had told him what she believed Harry would do and think and feel in the end.

Potter blinked, and shuddered, and looked puzzled for a moment. Then his eyes snapped up to Lucius’s face.

“The blue-gray color,” he breathed. “That was the color of your Manor and your old family crest.”

Lucius inclined his head. “You are now linked to the Manor’s wards, accepted as one of the family,” he said. “You will be able to pass in and out of the house at will, though anyone who comes with you and is not a Malfoy in blood will still need to be verified with the wards. You are welcome to us, always. You may command our house elves.” He saw Potter’s eyes spark
at that, but he listened in patient silence. Lucius approved. This dance was old, and not the place for whatever new notions Potter might have. “You will be recognized by old family treasures which would not normally respond to any wizard but one born a Malfoy. In good measure, you are ours now, Harry.”

Potter did not react to the sudden change of name, unless the deeper inclination of his head sprang from that, and Lucius did not really think it did. “Thank you, Lucius. This is a princely gift.”

Lucius smiled at him. “I feel yours is as well.”

The magic swelled around them at that, the sword descending until Lucius felt the cold metal on the back of his neck. Then it turned warm, and ran away like water, and the dance ended, and they were bound.

Lucius smirked at the others as he stood and walked away from Harry. Narcissa’s gaze was soft, as well it might be. Lucius had explained to her what he meant to do, and she had entirely approved.

He will be tied closely to all of us, but he is now bound most closely to the Malfoys. We have the largest claim on him. When the war is done and the normal round of life resumes, we shall have an advantage with him that no one else does.

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Harry backed slowly away from Lucius, dazed. He really had not expected that, and he was still trying to determine just how he felt about it.

Draco caught his eye and smiled at him, and Harry was reminded that he had wanted to give Draco his Christmas gift when he would feel best that evening. He did now, the ancient pleasure of the magic, the ritual repeated so many times that the magic had a life of its own, still sliding across his skin. He lifted his hands and cast out a skein of light between them.

He had once calmed his destructive magic by creating things. He had not determined to do this so that he would have the solace of creation, but it made the gift he was about to give even better, after what had happened to him.

“Merry Christmas, Draco,” he whispered, when he was sure that he had Draco’s attention, and then remembered.

He turned and spun the light, pouring the memories into it much as he had poured the happy memories of his life with Connor into the memory album. This time, though, they took the form of images, scenes he had lived through with Draco.

He chose their first flying lesson, even though at the time he had been furious at Draco for making him show off in front of other people. Now, though, it was rather funny to see Draco lob Neville’s Remembrall into the air and himself chase after it, especially because he could remember the exact infuriating smirk on Draco’s face when he caught the little ball and turned around.

He let that scene waver and melt into one of the many study sessions he’d shared with Draco that first year. They’d shared the same Defense Against the Dark Arts book, since Draco had lost his that evening. Harry still hadn’t been very trusting, then, but he had let Draco settle in the chair next to him and bend his head over the book beside his. Harry let the colors of the scene slide into a soft light that he knew hadn’t come from the fireplace that evening, just to show Draco how supremely, deeply content he had been then, though he hadn’t realized it at the time.

Then came the first party after he’d won a Quidditch game against the Ravenclaw team, and Draco laughing at him when he cast a hex on Blaise, and him teaching Draco spells, and their meeting in Diagon Alley the summer before second year, and a conversation in the hospital wing when Harry had still been trying to keep Draco from realizing that the dairy affecting his mind had come from Lucius, and flashes of the Chamber of Secrets tunnel where Draco had walked just behind him into the heart of danger—nothing closer to the Chamber than that; the direct memory still hurt too much for Harry to touch it—and some of the time he’d spent with Draco over the summer afterwards, and how he’d reached out for Draco when he missed his friend after two weeks apart, and how Draco had spoken to him before he went home for Christmas last year, and the way he’d come dashing out of the Manor when Harry had shown up there, and the talk they’d had in the hospital wing at the end of last year, and the apology Draco had given him after he’d summoned Julia and been doused with empathy, and an image of them curled up in bed together.

He ended with a memory he hadn’t actually seen from outside, but thought he could imagine well enough: that of Draco hugging him tonight, just before they journeyed to the clearing. He smiled at Draco over the top of the skein of light, and then
parted his hands and let it flow away.

He didn’t think he could put the memories into a Pensieve and keep them around. They would be too intense for everyday sight. But as a special gift, as a way of showing Draco how much he meant to him, he could do this, yes.

Draco was staring at him with an expression that Harry knew he had never seen on his face before. He looked slightly flushed, and tears stood glittering in his eyes. But he reached out a hand, and Harry went to him without hesitation.

Draco didn’t try to pull him into an embrace, just looked at him. Harry forced himself to meet that gaze head-on. If Draco had heard what his mother had said to him, there would be questions later, he knew.

But Draco just nodded for now, and whispered, “I have something to tell you. It’s important. Give me—give me a little while, and I can tell you.”

Harry couldn’t keep his brows from arching in curiosity, but his allies were waiting at their backs, so he nodded back and said, “All right. I can wait.”

He turned and met their eyes. Hawthorn and Adalrico had knelt, while Elfrida had settled further back into her chair. Narcissa, of all of them, stood in the forefront, her gaze direct and her smile warm.

“To you, Harry Potter, I pledge my loyalty and my faith,” she said. “And as a token of that loyalty and my faith, I give you this.” She came forward and gently laid something down at his feet.

Harry picked it up. It was a small hand mirror, made of black wood, with a silvery face. He looked up at her in question.

“This is one of the Black treasures,” said Narcissa, “the one I remember the best from when I was a girl. I couldn’t resist picking it up when we went—where we went.” Harry almost smiled when he realized how reluctant she was to mention the name of the Black house in front of his allies, but he didn’t, because it would have been a smile of amusement, and this was not that kind of moment. “Look into the mirror, and it will show you images of the place that my ancestors claimed they came from. A country of fire and air. It’s lovely.”

Harry blinked. “Why?”

“For when you can find nothing beautiful around you,” said Narcissa, and gave him a deep, sad smile. “I felt an explosion of Dark magic before you came to us, and the trees hindered our purpose in walking to the clearing. You had an encounter with someone who meant you harm, and I recognize the look in your eyes from the summer you spent with us. It was one of your parents.”

Harry hastily dropped his eyes. Narcissa’s hand brushed his hair, and then she turned and walked away so that Hawthorn could come forward.

“To you, Harry Potter, I pledge my loyalty and my faith.” Hawthorn’s voice was deeper than Narcissa’s, laden with a different music, and she placed a pot with a vine growing out of it at his feet. “Our home is called the Garden, and many Parkinsons for the last hundred years have taken the names of flowers. What I’ve brought you is a small plant enchanted to bear hawthorn blossoms. Speak into them, and I will hear you, wherever I am.”

Harry blinked. “I thought hawthorn plants were, well, bigger.”

Hawthorn laughed at him, lolling her tongue slowly from her mouth. “That is why I enchanted one to bear you flowers, Harry, and not simply brought you a bush,” she said, and then backed off.

Adalrico came forward, and dipped his head. “To you, Harry Potter, we pledge our loyalty and our faith,” he said. “I speak for my wife as well as myself.” Harry nodded. He’d expected that, given Elfrida’s condition and her training. “We, perhaps, do not do as well as the others. One gives you a gift of peace, another a gift that will bring her aid. We give you a gift of war.”

He handed a small object to Harry that Harry quickly realized was a sheathed knife. He hissed to himself, but he did not think it was the same thing as the knife Lucius had sent him for one of his truce-gifts. He drew the blade, and gasped slightly. It appeared to be made of gold, though the glittering edge said it wasn’t; gold would have been too soft. He touched it with one
finger and glanced up questioningly at Adalrico.

“One of my ancestors fell in love with a Lady of the Light,” said Adalrico softly. “But she would not have him, which is not surprising, since he was Declared Dark and had aided the Dark Lord that Lady defeated. He created this knife to symbolize what he could not have. The hilt is forged of the same rock that makes up Blackstone’s walls. The knife blade is sunlight that he captured on a Midsummer evening—the last ray as the sun sank beneath the horizon on the day of longest light.”

“I can’t take this,” Harry whispered. “It’s too precious.”

“You must,” said Adalrico, and folded his hands firmly around the knife. “My ancestor succeeded better than he knew. The hilt is Dark, and amenable enough to our hands. But the blade is Light, and she has never been happy with us. She twists rather than strike true. She shines more for you already than I have seen her do for anyone else. Let her stay where she will be happy.”

Harry nodded, and swallowed, and slipped the knife into his robe pocket. Adalrico bowed to him and stepped away.

“Is there anything else?” Harry asked, unable to believe it could end so abruptly, but unable to think of any other rituals that were required, either. He hadn’t even known he would meet the rest of his allies here, and so he’d planned nothing for greeting anyone other than Lucius.

“I had one question.”

Harry nodded and turned to face Lucius, who had his head cocked to one side, his hair slipping over his eyes. “Ask it.”

“We felt an explosion of Dark magic before you came to us,” Lucius said softly. “We felt it yearning towards the stars, and then it folded away again. We knew it must have been you. What caused that?”

Harry found himself fighting the temptation to sink to the ground again. He drew in a deep breath, and said, “My mother came to speak to me.”

Lucius’s eyes widened slightly. Harry wondered why. Had he not thought that Lily Potter was still alive?

No. Wait. He knows something about the prophecy now, or at least the information surrounding the prophecy. That means—

“Your mother made you that angry,” said Lucius. “Most parents do not do that when they are merely contradicting their children, and you are not a child who takes so ill to a parent’s high-handed decree. She could not have been in danger, or you would have brought her with you. You did not meet happily.” He nodded, as though to say he were satisfied with his own reasoning. “What did she do to you?”

Harry could feel Draco trembling beside him, yearning to tell. Snape said nothing. He would say nothing, Harry knew, as much because he felt out of place here as because he would not betray Harry’s secrets. But Draco was a danger, especially because he had heard so much. And this was his father. He would see almost nothing wrong with telling him.


“We cannot,” said Adalrico, with a dawning note of horror in his voice. “Your mother. What can she have done?”

“Your mother finished with you last Christmas,” said Narcissa, and then her eyes widened as if she were listening to herself. “A year and a day,” she said. “Did she come to demand vengeance? And what can she have done? I know you, Harry, and you are not one to let your magic fly simply because your mother made an unreasonable demand of you. What did she say? What do?”

Harry shook his head. “No,” he breathed. “I will not speak of this with you.”

Lucius made a noise. Harry looked at him, and blinked. He had not realized that Lucius had enough soul left in him to look sickened. “Harry, was there—“

“Do not push me, Lucius.”
Harry allowed a bit of his power to flare out from his shields along with his words, and that silenced Lucius immediately. Everyone in the clearing was staring at him now, except Draco, who was clinging to his side like a monkey again, and Snape, who murmured soothing words while looking away so that Harry could have at least one gaze off him. Harry nodded.

“It is over and done,” said Harry, when he thought he could speak without hitting someone, either with his fist or with a slap of power. “I see no reason to speak of it again. I see no reason for anyone to confront her. It is done. Pushing matters further in the past only resulted in blood feuds, in endless conflicts between families.” He was privately impressed with himself for managing such cool words when his insides were vibrating like plucked harpstrings. “You are my allies, and I do not think this an unreasonable request.” He turned his eyes to Adalrico, Elfrida, and Hawthorn. “You swore formal alliance with me, and so you are my family’s friends as well as mine. You cannot take up arms or magic against them.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the Malfoys. “You are not my family’s allies, but we are bonded closely,” he said, “more closely than ever now since the completion of the truce-dance. This is the end. It is enough. I want no one to touch my mother again. I want to forget about her.”

“Your wounds still bleed,” said Lucius, the strange expression lingering on his face. “That is enough reason to destroy her.”

Harry forced his eyes to remain blank and calm as he watched Lucius. “I will attack you if you harm her,” he said softly. “I’ll suffer the backlash of magic from the broken truce, of course, but I am strong enough to survive. I am the one she hurt. I should be the one to decide what vengeance is given, and I say there will be no more.”

“This would be the meting out of justice,” Lucius spat, a more familiar anger working its way back into his eyes.


Lucius only shook his head slowly, as though he could not comprehend how Harry thought, but he turned away without another word. Narcissa lingered, looking hard at Harry. Harry refused to meet her eyes, and in the end, she followed her husband.

Hawthorn opened her mouth, but in the end, she had to leave, and so did Adalrico. Both of them had made the terms of their alliance willingly; neither could harm James, Lily, or Connor. Elfrida did stare hard at Harry, pressing his hand.

“If you had been my own,” she said, “I would have raised you with love, and with more pride in the strength of your magic than fear of you.”

Harry couldn’t suppress a wince, but he told himself it was only a lucky guess that let Elfrida pierce so close to the heart of the matter, and not truth. “Thank you,” he said, and kissed her cheek.

Her chair floated away, with Adalrico close beside her. Harry took several deep breaths, his head clearing, and then turned and met Snape’s and Draco’s gazes.

“And now?” Snape asked, his voice emotionless.

“No,” said Harry, picking up the mirror and the hawthorn plant, shrinking them, and slipping them into his pockets, “we go to Dumbledore.”

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Albus knew they were coming long before they reached his office. That was not solely because of the wards on Hogwarts, either, or because of the spells he had cast on his moving staircase to let him know when someone was nearing his door.

He knew they would come when Lily failed. They would know where this had begun, and they would seek out the one they blamed for this, and doubtless try to hurt him.

Albus was even inclined to let them—up to a point.

The door opened, and the young Malfoy heir led the way. He walked in front of Harry, as though he were a guard. At Harry’s back came Severus, his face gone so blank that Albus was reminded of the way he had looked while awaiting his trial on charges of being a Death Eater and war criminal.
Harry stepped around Draco Malfoy and looked at Albus.

Albus looked back, his heart aching. He had made a very bad mistake. He had underestimated Harry, thinking of him as only a mass of needs and emotions that he understood very well. After all, was not Harry the product of Lily’s training? And had he not himself trained Lily, taught her to distinguish between selfishness and the world’s need, inured her to sacrifice?

But Harry had changed enough in the period between the time he arrived at Hogwarts and now that he had become more than those needs. Albus had been aware of that, dimly, but he had thought that he need only emotionally exhaust Harry, and then isolate him with Lily, in order to turn him back into what he had been, the trained savior that the world so badly needed. People with less damaged minds than Harry had been turned that way. Albus knew the Death Eaters had used the technique.

Lily had misstepped. Harry’s eyes were uncompromising, and Albus prepared himself for a list of demands.

“I consider that I have no truce with you,” said Harry, speaking in a voice of flat, utter calm. Albus had heard wizards use that voice right before they committed suicide, or induced others to commit it. “You have broken it badly enough that I have no more obligations to you. I ask only noninterference. If you do not hurt me further, then I shall be content to ignore you.”

“And the war?” Albus had to ask, since that was the reason he had sacrificed Harry and Lily and Peter and many other people in the first place.

“Neutral allies, perhaps.” Harry looked almost indifferent. He would not let Albus touch him again; that was plain in his stance and his voice, even while Draco and Severus looked at him incredulously. “I have no objection to your helping Connor and me fight against Voldemort. That does not mean that I will consider a close working arrangement. And while I accept that I can do nothing about Connor’s being in the Tournament by now, I will hurt you again if you hurt him.”

Albus sat in silence. This was both more and less than he had expected. He was grateful that he would not have to pay too heavy a price for his mistakes, but he could not see what Harry was gaining from this.

I must be sure, he thought, meeting those blank, hard green eyes. He’s a grown man now, I see that, but I don’t know what kind of man he is, and I must, for the world to be safe.

“And Lily?” he asked.

“Keep her away from me,” said Harry, “unless I ever specifically indicate that I want to see her again. Save her foot, if you can. Do not mention her name to me. I have no more interest in seeing this splashed across the front page of the Daily Prophet than you do. But so far as I am concerned, I am an orphan now. I am going to write back to my father tomorrow and explain the situation to him.”

That was Draco, bursting out with all the passion of one still a child. Albus had seen how he fought Lily, though. He wondered if he should have to consider this boy also a young man, and what it would mean if he did.

“You think I should give James another chance?” Harry looked at Draco in gentle inquiry.

“You can’t mean that, Harry!”

Harry turned and met Albus’s eyes. Albus flinched.

“But I know why he did it,” said Harry softly, into the sudden terrible silence. “He wanted to keep everything as it had been. And now he’s seen that won’t work. He nearly had a second Dark Lord on his hands this evening. I know that he won’t try something like that again. We understand each other now.” A faint mocking tone touched his voice on the last words.

“And I know why it’s better to leave him alive and not attack him,” Harry said. “He’s a Light Lord, though he so rarely uses his magic that most people forget that. He’s stronger than I am. If I tried to destroy him, he would resist, and that might destroy Hogwarts, Scotland—let us be realistic, half of Britain. I will hurt him only if I must, only if he interferes with me again.”
Albus inclined his head. A terrible upset was growing in him, but he could give it no name as yet.

“And he’s Headmaster of Hogwarts,” Harry went on. “He’s tied into the wards of the school. In the last extremity, the school will obey him. I don’t fancy giving him hostages to work his will with.”

“You can bring him to court.” That was Severus, his voice soft, so soft, and bitter. *Of course*, Albus thought, as he gazed at his old pupil. *He has been before the Wizengamot twice now, and not truly believed he deserved it either time.* ‘Tell everyone what he has done. They would prevent him from remaining Headmaster, and the Aurors do have ways of binding even Lords who have done wrong.’

Albus narrowed his eyes and lifted his head. “Did you think I would let you do that, Severus?” he asked.

Severus’s eyes stared through him, dark and still.

“I told you before,” said Harry. “I won’t have that. I won’t have my so-called parents food for every carrion crow come to feast. I won’t embarrass Connor that way. I won’t have everyone knowing what—what happened to me.” He shook his head. “They are not to see.”

Albus felt a sudden surge of gratitude towards Lily. *That she trained him to shun public notice might yet be the salvation of us all.*

“But they should be punished, Harry,” Draco insisted.

“I’m not interested in casting blame.” Harry gave him a flat look. “I told you, I want this ended, cut off so it can’t grow any further. That means turning my back on notions of owing them anything else, but it also means giving up the notion of vengeance.”

“I hate it,” whispered Draco.

“I know.” Harry put a hand on his shoulder and kept it there, acting as if he had forgotten Albus were watching. “But it’s done.”

Albus gave a name, finally, to the feeling rising in his chest. He would have preferred it if Harry had stormed into the office, denouncing him and Lily and preparing to extract a pound of flesh in payment. This quiet, cold way of burying everything in silence was the way a pure Slytherin would take vengeance.

*If he is everything that Lily made him, then she sculpted him into a Slytherin, and my advice helped that. We ruined our own plans.*

That was too upsetting to think about for right now, so Albus nodded and gave his consent to Harry’s terms. There was really nothing else he could do, and this time, he had no notion of violating them. All his plans so far had foundered on the rocks of Harry’s personality. He would have to rebuild them from the ground up.

For some reason, though, what haunted him when the three Slytherins had left his office was not Harry’s cold gaze or his words, but Severus’s eyes, dark and implacable as the deeps of space.

And as unforgiving.

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He and Draco were back in their room—luckily, with Blaise and Vince both in the common room bragging about dancing with their dates—before Harry thought to ask, “I thought you had a Christmas present for me, Draco?”

Draco flushed, surprisingly. “Yeah,” he said. “My mum slipped it to me while you were dancing with my father.” He looked down. “But it feels silly next to the one you gave me.”

“*Draco.*”
The word was enough. Draco took a deep breath and slid a flat box out of his robes, which must have been enchanted to
insure that it didn’t bulge and distort the cloth oddly.

“Merry Christmas, Harry,” he whispered.

Harry opened the box eagerly. The other gifts he had received this night had been grand and solemn, and he valued what they
represented more than he could value them for themselves. But Draco was outside that. Draco was not just an ally to him, and
that made his gifts more than just truce-promises.

Harry found a wizard’s chess set inside. He picked up one of the pieces, and stared. It was a Hungarian Horntail, carved as if
it were crouched over a nest of eggs. As he watched, it flexed its wings and turned to glance up at him.

Rooting through the rest of the box, he found that all the pieces were dragons. The queens were Horntails in flight, the kings
Welsh Greens with their wings half-spread, the pawns tiny dragonets, the rooks the Horntails on their nests, the bishops
snarling Chinese Fireballs that warmed his fingers when he touched them, and the knights rearing Antipodean Opaleyes. All
of them moved on their own, even if it was only to swivel their eyes and roar, and all were colored in the appropriate hues for
their scales.

Harry shook his head and swallowed, then looked up. “It’s wonderful,” he said. “How?”

Draco blushed. “I owled the instructions to my mother,” he said. “She got it made. But I paid for it out of my own vault. I
wanted you to have it, Harry. The dragons didn’t leave you enough of themselves. At least you can remember them now.”

Harry carefully set the set on the bed and grabbed Draco, tugging him to him hard enough to make the dragons bounce and
snarl in their box. He held his friend tight, until Draco made a muffled complaint about breathing. Then he muttered into his
ear, “You idiot. It’s perfect.”

Draco shivered, which was odd, and made Harry wonder if he still had a bit of melting snow down his neck or something.
But he pulled back with a pleased smile and said, “I’m glad you like it. Do you want to play?”

Harry was more than happy to start playing. It distracted Draco from asking questions that he didn’t want asked, for one
thing.

But it also made Draco’s face flush further when he found out that the Chinese Fireballs were resistant to being moved, and
he argued with several of them, while they responded by trying to bite his fingers off. For some reason, Harry found, he
really liked watching Draco when his eyes were bright and he was animated like that.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: Self-Recording Pensieves

Jane Blane
Committee On Experimental Potions
December 31st, 1994

Dear Madam Blane:

I wish to register the creation of a new potion with your Committee. I have completed the necessary forms (see attached
packet), and this letter is only to give a short description of the potion for your records.

I invented this potion to mimic the properties of a Pensieve. It has the silvery color and texture of thoughts placed into a
Pensieve, and holds memories, as they do. However, this potion takes the strongest memories of a certain specific mind in the
room with it, the first new one to enter once its creator has placed it into a bottle made of glass (see attached packet,
especially forms C.1 and D.4, for details on the necessity of a glass container), and contains them. The creator of the potion
must usually speak to this new person in order to facilitate certain memories floating to the forefront of the mind. Also, while
the Pensieve Potion can contain a great many memories, and store them very fast, it is sometimes a tedious task to sort
through them. Each container of the potion can be used only once, and only on the first person other than the creator to enter
the room where it is present; should a second person enter the room, it will not record his memories. All these are limitations
of the potion that I intend to work out as my research continues.
Suggested uses: instructing students, testing the veracity of suspected criminals, providing testimony at trial.

I await your word on whether you will allow the production of this potion, and hope to find favor in your eyes.

I am,
Professor Severus Snape
Potions Master
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty: Election Day

The Muggles had never been able to see the last tower in the Tower of London, where the Ministry had kept its voting owls for four hundred years. Rather than following the usual practice of cloaking it in illusions of a ruined bit of stonework, the original family that had hit upon the idea of the voting owls, the Light-devoted Gloryflowers, had Disillusioned the whole thing.

Rufus steadied himself on the uppermost level of a tower that he’d had to climb by feel, and shivered in the push of an impatient gust of wind, and decided that it was still—mostly—an excellent idea.

He turned and extended his hand, helping Amelia out of the last archway, though his murmured warning to duck her head came too late. She cursed under her breath, and then climbed up and stood beside him. Rufus heard her swallow as they looked out over the expanse of Muggle London, draped in snow and in silence. It was the first day of January, the first day of the new year.

And the day of our election.

Rufus found he was grinning. It was highly unusual for him to smile that much, but he couldn’t really help it. Things were changing. He might love the law, but he had no objection to change, especially when he thought it would improve the law.

“I never thought I would be standing here,” Amelia murmured.

Rufus turned to her and raised his eyebrows in an expression of polite disbelief. Oh, certainly, Amelia had been shocked that Fudge had gone as far as he had, but she had moved too quickly and smoothly, both before and after the vote of no confidence, to establish her own candidacy. Rufus didn’t think that he would really believe her if she admitted to no ambition.

Amelia tossed her head impatiently. “All right, I didn’t know that I would be standing here now,” she said.

Rufus could share that sentiment. “Neither did I,” he murmured, as he began walking carefully along the narrow path of invisible stone set before them, one hand resting on the outer wall to guide him. The wall was only up to his waist, not really as high as he could have wished. It was impossible for anyone but the candidates in a Ministerial election to alter the Tower, though—another Gloryflower addition—and Rufus certainly didn’t have the inclination or the talent to work stone. “I did think Cornelius would be Minister for another good ten years. Or perhaps not good, not under Cornelius, but at least not intolerably bad.”

“But he was,” said Amelia, hurrying after him.

Rufus cast an incredulous glance back at her, before understanding the gleam in her eyes. She wasn’t asking for reassurance. She was challenging him to say that she could possibly have acted wrongly. Rufus relaxed.

“He was,” he agreed. “And just think, we might not have known until too late if it wasn’t for Harry Potter.” He saw the gleam of metal ahead, and stepped back, bowing. Amelia had arranged this election. It was only right that she go first.

“The child disturbs me,” Amelia muttered, as she took the honor with a nod to him. “Lords don’t appear from nowhere like that. Dumbledore’s coming was like a storm slowly rolling over Britain, and there were rumors of You-Know-Who for a long time before he showed his face.”
I do not think he has evil intentions.” Rufus had already had this argument several times. He found it amusing that everyone around him kept thinking he would change his mind about the boy.

“I just find it unnatural,” Amelia murmured, and this time Rufus deliberately didn’t warn her to duck her head as she passed under the arched door into the last invisible room. “Ouch!”

Rufus held his laughter, and followed her, almost crouching. They could still see outside, but there were walls around them; the wind was cut to almost nothing. And around them sat the only part of the Tower not under the Disillusionment Charm: thousands of small, perfectly wrought golden owls, with emerald eyes.

Rufus froze with admiration. It was one thing to hear about them, or see one of them flying with a ballot in its belly, another to see them gathered all together. These were Gloryflower creations, too. The Dark families had a tradition of making artificial animals of the kind that crawled on corpses or hid in abandoned houses—spiders, snakes, rats, centipedes—but the Light ones made beautiful and useful creatures—horses, unicorns, owls.

He barely breathed as he reached out and touched one of the owls on its cold breast. A moment after he touched it, it lit with sparks of warmth under his fingers, and the owl turned its head. Emerald eyes surveyed Rufus for a moment. Rufus held still and waited, patiently. He had already passed the first test—the owls would respond only to the touch of an actual declared candidate for the Minister’s post—but he had to wait for the bird to inspect him. The Gloryflowers had not kept control of the owls in their family, but bound them to the Tower and the candidates for the position. Rufus could feel the ancient magic all around him, surging through owl after owl, awakening them one after one, singing and roaring in the invisible stone.

The wave met the wave coming from the owl Amelia had touched, opposite the one he had, and collided with it. For a moment, it was like a meeting of two breakers, and Rufus thought he felt the Tower tremble. Then the waves melted into one another, and he and Amelia stood in the middle of a joined ring.

The owls surged up into the air as one, their wings spreading and catching the harsh New Year’s wind. In a moment, they spun around and hurtled out the windows that they could see, though Rufus would only be able to find them by feel. They exploded in dozens of different directions the moment they were out, heading off to every wizard seventeen or older in Britain—well, the ones who weren’t incapacitated by legal restrictions such as being in prison from voting, anyway. They would coast down to each wizard or witch and spit out the ballots already growing in their bellies. The wizard or witch must write down a choice for Minister and return the ballots to the owls. Every bird would be back in the Tower by nightfall, and Rufus and Amelia, together, would count the ballots. The owls’ magic would keep them honest, just as it would prevent anyone else from interfering with their flight.

“Well,” said Amelia, when the last owl was out of sight, traveling like a small golden comet flung through stars, “what now?”

Rufus cast a warming charm, and conjured a chair in the corner of the room. “Now we sit down and compare plans for what we’re going to do when we become Minister,” he said. “Excuse me. For when I become Minister.”

Amelia rolled her eyes and conjured a chair of her own. “You can dream, Rufus. No one ever said that you weren’t ambitious.”

“No, they didn’t,” said Rufus, and began, patiently, to outline the new way the Aurors would work, and how Amelia would have to prepare for several unexpected losses in that department if he won—or even if he didn’t.

*******

“For whom are you voting, Severus?”

Snape gave McGonagall a distrustful look as he took the ballot from the voting owl’s beak. She had been pestering him since the night of the Yule Ball for details of Harry’s mental state and magic, and when he had refused to give them to her, she’d retreated into these useless pleasantries, as if she really thought that they would persuade him to relax his guard.

“It’s none of your business,” he said, and quickly scrambled the name, and returned it to the owl. The little creature swallowed the ballot and lifted, skimming towards the windows of the Great Hall, instinctively avoiding the other birds, both real and artificial, headed the same way. Snape watched, almost hoping that someone would try to grab his owl, but no one
did. Too bad. The punishment for interfering with a voting owl was amusing to watch: a crippling lightning-like shock to the fingers, which kept someone from being able to write for the rest of the day.

“..."I might as well tell you that I voted for Scrimgeour,” said McGonagall, and leaned back in her chair, surveying the students eating in the Great Hall with a kind of lazy indolence.

Snape watched her in silence. He had no objection to taking knowledge of her when she offered it on a silver platter like this, and she might as well be saying that she'd abandoned the Headmaster. She knew that Scrimgeour and Dumbledore didn’t get along, and she had voted for him anyway.

"Why?" Snape asked quietly. He meant several different things by it, on several different resonances. He wondered if she would pick up on all of them.

Her smile was ever so slightly bitter. “I tried to speak to him about a—problem I had with my upper-year Gryffindors, and I spoke to him about your imprisonment. Neither helped. He put me off with platitudes, and with phrases like ‘the implacable logic of war.’ He talked about not being able to change anything, or disrupt the normal course of law in wizarding Britain. And then it turned out that he did vote to depose Fudge and free you, after all, when I hadn’t thought he would do so. I know that I didn’t pay the prices for that, Severus. I’m afraid that Harry did.”

Snape froze. He had been trying to observe all he could of the other Slytherins and the way they acted around Harry, since he knew it was different now, but no one had so far hinted that Harry had given any sacrifices to free him. “Do you know what it was?” he asked.

McGonagall shook her head. “He missed my class the Friday before the First Task, and Draco Malfoy fainted in it. There were rumors that Hawthorn Parkinson had escorted Harry back to bed in the Slytherin common room. He had some kind of tipping point, Severus, but I don’t know what it was.” She closed her eyes, as though running the events over again in her mind, then opened them. They had the gleam of a cat chasing down a mouse. “He did receive a letter that morning.”

"From his mother, perhaps?"

Snape snarled and stood. He would have to find Harry and have this out with him, one way or another. In the days since Christmas, Harry had effectively stonewalled both him and Draco, saying that he didn’t want to talk about what had happened with Lily, that it was done and that was quite enough. He would talk about spells, Dark Arts, most of what he’d done during Snape’s imprisonment, potions, what he thought of Scrimgeour’s chances to become the new Minister—anything but what was most important to heal and not just freeze his wounds.

Snape could not imagine Harry breaking down over a letter unless the letter was from Lily. And if Harry had written back to her as part of any bargain to get Snape free…

My Slytherins have him accepting help more readily than he would otherwise. It is now time to make him listen when we ask him not to do things that are sacrifices for him or injurious to his mental health.

******

Harry leaned back on his pillow and thoughtfully turned James’s latest letter over and over in his hands. He had written and explained that he didn’t want to see his father again, nor have him be concerned over Harry. He would do nothing to interfere in his relationship with Connor, but he had seen Lily again and she had convinced him that he was done with parents.

James had sent back this letter, as if he didn’t like Harry’s cutting off of contact. Perhaps it would simply say that James would be the one to decide how and if they cut off contact, Harry thought, with a quiver of a smile.

He supposed it would not do much harm if he read it. He certainly did not have to respond, did not feel bound, as he had with his mother—

Harry strangled the thought, which he’d become good at doing, and slid its corpse under the pools of his mind with the corpses of all the other thoughts about her. He slit the envelope and drew out the letter. It was a simple message, and short.

Dear Harry:
You told me that you had not looked into the Pensieve. Until you do, you will not understand why I cannot allow you to cut off contact. You must have a parent, Harry, and I’m the best choice for the role.

Your loving father,
James.

Harry raised his eyebrows. Well, part of that’s true enough. I didn’t want to see what he might have chosen to send me—probably more memories of a happy family to bring me back to my senses—but perhaps it really is important.

He stretched out a hand and murmured, “Accio James’s Pensieve.”

The trunk at the foot of the bed opened, and the Pensieve came skimming in through the curtains. Harry was grateful that no one else was in the room. Blaise had gone off to moon over Ginny, Vince to join a snowball fight in the courtyard that the upper-year Ravenclaws had been talking about excitedly at breakfast.

Draco…

Harry shook his head. Draco had pushed him a bit too far this morning. He’d tried to reassure Harry that his magic wasn’t foul or evil or awful-smelling, and ignored Harry’s quiet requests to stop talking about it. Harry had finally cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, and then cast an illusion at the door, to make it look as though he’d hurried out of the room. Draco was off looking for him now, while Harry made himself comfortable in his bed with James’s letter and the latest book Snape had lent him.

Harry drew the Pensieve towards him, and ignored his own fear. Yes, he had some reason to be nervous about Pensieves, but James was not a wizard of Dumbledore’s strength and skill. Harry didn’t really think he could enchant a Pensieve into a trap, nor that he would want to try. Besides, his own magic was strong enough to resist most spells his father could cast.

He plunged his head beneath the surface.

He found himself in a room it took him a moment to recognize: his father’s study at Lux Aeterna. Harry turned in a circle, studying it. The walls were lined with books, and a desk directly in front of him was scattered with papers. Harry walked towards them, curious. He could see no one else in the room just yet.

He bent over the papers, and his eyes widened. They were copies of old *Daily Prophet* articles, concerning the Death Eater trials. On the top one was a photograph of Snape, his stare fixed on something unseen as he sat in the chain-bound chair of the Wizengamot courtroom.

“I’ve looked and looked.”

Harry jumped and glanced over his shoulder. James had entered, with Remus close behind him, looking pale and harassed. Harry backed cautiously away from the desk, though of course they couldn’t see him. James sat down in the chair in front of the desk, and looked wistfully at the articles.

“I’ve tried to justify my son’s choice of guardian,” he whispered, “and I can’t. Even when I know he was acting as a spy for Dumbledore, making his own sacrifices for the war, Snape was still a bastard. Listen to this.” He picked up the paper on top and cleared his throat. “Asked whether it was true that he had risked his life to stop several Death Eater attacks on Muggle villages in late October of this year, Severus Snape told the Wizengamot to ‘believe what you like. You will anyway.’” James shook his head and slammed the paper down. “Can you believe him?”

“I don’t think his general truthfulness is why Harry chose him as his guardian, James,” said Remus, and rubbed his forehead.

You’re wrong, Harry thought, at least in part. He glanced curiously out the study’s window. The cheerful colors spoke to him of early autumn. This would be before Remus had left James to go to the Seers’ Sanctuary, then.

“I’ve been through all of them,” said James adamantly, “looking for some sign that he displayed any of those qualities he was supposed to have—courage, strength of will, compassion—to other people. Nothing. I think Harry made a mistake, Remus. He must have done. Snape puts on a good act, but he only wants Harry with him to get one over on me. I’ve looked at it up and down, and I can come to no other conclusion.”
“I told you what I saw at the school last year,” said Remus. “There are times Snape would have killed Sirius to keep Harry safe.”

“And now he’s dead.” James’s voice was an ugly, bitter thing. Harry winced. Did he ever mourn like Connor and I did? His father pushed the articles around in an agitated manner. “I don’t know, Remus. I suppose perhaps the papers don’t have the most unbiased sources. I’ll look elsewhere.” He stood up and paced to the door. “I just can’t believe that a man I’ve always despised should have more favor from my son than I do,” he whispered.

Remus caught himself on what looked like the edge of a vehement protest, and shook his head. They left, shutting the door behind them, and the Pensieve shuddered lightly, and Harry found himself in the midst of another memory.

This next image showed his father alone in his study, watching another Pensieve. Shrugging off thoughts about an endless succession of mirrors and becoming trapped in them, Harry edged up beside him and looked down.

A younger James was floating in midair, his robes dangling over his head as a spell suspended him by his ankle. Harry couldn’t hear sounds from the remembered Pensieve, but he could see the younger version of his father thrashing and struggling. He could imagine the humiliation that would be rising off him. James had never liked being embarrassed, which was one reason Snape’s insanity potion had worked as well as it had.

“How can there be anything good in him?” whispered the memory of the older James. “When he invented spells like that?”

Harry stared at his face in wonder. Does he really think that will convince me? I know that he and the other Marauders went after Snape, too. It’s not just a one-sided grudge. And if Snape couldn’t put it in the past and have done with it, then neither could he.

“He’s not the right kind of man to be a father;” James went on muttering, and then pushed the Pensieve away from him, and Harry was in another memory, though he did think before he went, If the papers aren’t unbiased witnesses, what do you say about your own memories?

This time, James was standing on the very outer edge of Lux Aeterna’s lawn, his arms folded around his chest as he frowned at the wards.

“How Potter,” he said.

The wards went on glowing.

“Draco Malfoy.”

A small spark from the wards, but they remained mostly quiescent.

“Severus Snape.”

The wards snarled and animated, one of them projecting something that looked like a tooth or a scorpion’s sting. James nodded, satisfied, and stepped back from the projection, which sank into the magic a moment later.

“They still consider him a Dark, evil bastard,” he said.

Harry rolled his eyes. Has he forgotten that the house leans on him, and adopts his likes and dislikes? Of course it’s going to forbid entrance to Snape. He practiced Dark magic, but so did Draco, and so did I. James’s emotions are also a deciding factor in who gets to enter there.

And so it went, through memory after memory, as James apparently sought evidence for existence of some good traits in Snape, and found nothing. Harry watched in growing disgust. He could appreciate his father’s determination to make sure that, if he had to yield up care of one of his sons, he was yielding it to the right person, but his grudge would have made him blind to a good streak a mile wide. And Snape’s was narrower than that, but still. Harry thought it was the kind he needed.

If he would only stop trying to talk to me about Lily, at least.

The memories ended with a sight of James writing the letter he’d sent along with the Pensieve. Harry pulled his head out with
a sigh, and eyed the Pensieve for a moment, wondering if he should send it back.

No, he decided at last. *I don’t want him to think I’m rejecting what he tried to do for me. But I’d better make my letter utterly clear, and concise, and to the point.*

He summoned a sheet of parchment and a quill, and wrote the letter braced on his Defense Against the Dark Arts book.

*Dear James:*

*I’m afraid that I still think Snape is a good guardian for me. He isn’t you, and he isn’t Lily or Dumbledore, and at the moment, that’s what makes him best. He would fight for me. He does make an effort to teach me to defend myself. He doesn’t think that the war against Voldemort is more important than I am. He saved my life the other night. I keep telling you that I’m fine with him. I’ll tell you again, and I hope that this time you’ll listen to me, instead of deciding that your own son can’t possibly know what he’s talking about.*

*Harry.*

Harry thought a moment, then added:

*P.S. I wouldn’t mind keeping up communication with you, but trying to force me to return is the worst thing you could do right now. I don’t have a problem cutting off the communication, either.*

He was not sure that was the right idea, but James had proven less hopeless than Harry had thought he would. He was also not Lily, and he’d shown no sign of knowing about Lily’s and Dumbledore’s plots. If he ever *did* reveal that he had, Harry would start burning his letters the moment they came, and would send no more of his own.

He went to the Owlery to post his letter, accompanied now and then by the golden gleam of voting owls. They paid no attention to him. Harry found it rather refreshing.

On his way back down, he paused by one particular sealed classroom, and swept a hand across the door, sighing.

He would need to speak with Snape about this.

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Snape looked up in surprise as someone knocked on his office door. He hadn’t sent a message to Harry, and no one else would willingly seek him out on New Year’s Day.

“Enter,” he said.

Harry opened the door. One look at his set jaw, and Snape knew he wouldn’t have to summon his charge for a serious discussion.

He sat back and studied Harry in silence as the boy walked up to the desk and folded his arms. Snape said nothing. If Harry expected him to know what this was about, he didn’t, and he had learned that speaking too directly of Lily was the way to make Harry bristle. Best to let him choose the direction of the conversation, and then Snape would seize and guide it.

“I want to know what the Meleager Potion does,” said Harry.

Snape knew that he couldn’t hide the widening of his eyes, but at least he controlled it soon, and no one but Harry was there to see it. “Why?” he asked.

“Because Fawkes didn’t burn the potion and all your notes after all.” Harry sounded utterly unembarrassed to admit that he’d lied. “There’s a sample in a classroom upstairs, sealed with house elf magic. I didn’t dare to destroy it or unlight the candle floating in the middle of it, since I didn’t know what would happen to Minister Fudge if I did. What *would* happen?”

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and reminded himself not to get angry. His goal today was to make *Harry* lose his temper, since he thought it was the only way to make him speak freely. Besides, he’d brewed the potion under the influence of the cold anger. That put him in the wrong immediately.
“It would burn him,” said Snape. “Horribly. Painfully. From the inside out. And it would also burn years off his life, though he wouldn’t know that. Even if I let the candle stay undisturbed for the rest of his life, that might be only three more years. Or five. Or ten. Everything depends on my will.”

He looked at Harry, and found his charge frowning softly.

“How could you do that?” Harry asked.

Snape cocked his head to the side. *You are not getting angry. You can’t let yourself.* “Do you mean, how could I brew a potion like that?”

“Yes.” Harry studied him. “I know that you’re capable of great things, wonderful things. You’re certainly no stranger to compassion, or healing. Why would you brew a potion like that for the Minister, when he’d never done you any harm?”

*That* was going too far, Snape decided. “Do not play stupid with me,” he hissed, rising to his feet. “You spoke what you believed to be my reasons under Veritaserum at my trial. You know that I did it to avenge the insult to you, to hurt him for hurting you. You may judge me as you like for the overweening pride of that response, for my stupidity in getting caught, for letting my hatred overtake my reason, but you will not pretend that you expected me to forgive him. You know what I am, Harry. I have forgiven no one who hurt you, unless they have paid a price already. Black has paid that price. None of the others have.”

Harry’s face was pale. This was leading towards territory where he didn’t want Snape and Draco treading, Snape knew. He did not back up, though, and tried to keep the conversation on the Meleager Potion. “What should we do with it?”

“I could brew an antidote,” said Snape reluctantly. He had come halfway around the desk, but forced himself to pause. “But there might be a problem having the Minister take it. It would be better to brew a neutralizer, instead, something that can turn the sample of potion we have into harmless water. I will begin on that soon.” He scrutinized Harry in silence for a moment. “Will that satisfy you?”

Harry nodded. “So long as you think that Fudge will take no more ill effects from the potion.”

“No. It works as I have told you.” And it did. Snape was not holding back any secrets from his charge, not this time. He wanted his honesty reciprocated with honesty. “And I have no reason to use it, not again. The effects of the various poisons will remain in Fudge’s body, but without my will to act on them, and without the candle burning to act as an anchor for my will, they will stay inert.”

Harry relaxed slightly, but the tight lines around his eyes remained. “You still should not have done it,” he said.

“I should not have,” Snape agreed readily, and saw Harry blink, astonished, off-guard. He struck. “It was a stupid step to take, and you need a guardian who does not make stupid sacrifices. Just as I need a ward who does not make stupid sacrifices to free me. Did you answer letters from your mother so that Dumbledore would vote to depose the Minister and free me?”

The flush climbing Harry’s cheeks answered the question. But he shook his head a moment later. “Don’t talk about her,” he whispered. “It’s done.”

“The flush climbing Harry’s cheeks answered the question. But he shook his head a moment later. “Don’t talk about her,” he whispered. “It’s done.”

“When I can no longer see the parts she’s ripped out of your soul, then I will consider it done,” said Snape. “You made me swear not to hurt her, Harry, and I have not done so. That she left Hogwarts alive testifies to that.” Christmas night had been a sore test of his self-control. He would have been just as happy to go to the hospital wing and end everything with a swift *Avada Kedavra*, but Harry did not need his guardian going to prison again. “You did not make me promise to leave you wounded and soul-hurt.”

Harry’s eyes flashed with an emotion only half fury. Snape recognized the panic behind it, too. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he managed to say. “You know a lot already. Draco knows even more. He heard what she said to me. It’s enough that you know, isn’t it? You don’t need to go on talking to me about it. You don’t need to go on looking at me.”

“Harry—“

“I don’t want you to look at me,” Harry whispered. “Not this part of me. Promise that you won’t.”
Snape shook his head. “I will not give promises that I cannot keep.”

Harry snarled at him. He’d cracked the boy’s shell of cold indifference, Snape thought, but he had expected more anger than was there. Harry was frightened more than anything else. “I suffered. There. Is that what you want to hear? I did suffer, and now I’m not going to suffer at their hands anymore. They don’t need to be punished. Both of you are too obsessed with casting blame. Draco just won’t stop talking about it. Even when I beg him not to say a word about Lily, he still wants to reassure me that my magic isn’t foul.”

“Is that what she said to you?” Snape asked quietly. If he had known that Christmas night, he was not so sure that Lily would have lived, after all. Or she might have, but not as whole as she had been. There were spells that left no marks, and there was Obliviate.

“It doesn’t matter.” Harry looked torn between running and collapsing. “Please. Stop it. They don’t need to suffer. There doesn’t need to be vengeance.”

“I would disagree,” Snape murmured. “But I would say that, at least, there does need to be justice.”

“What does justice do but create more pain? No. Leave it alone. I won’t have anything to do with her again, and I’ve already taken more than she deserves to lose. Leave it.”

Snape simply watched Harry, saying nothing else, until his charge got himself back under control. Harry shut his eyes and stood in silence for a time, then shook his head. When he opened his eyes, he was smiling, and seemed determined to forget the whole thing.

“Can I help you come up with a neutralizer for the Meleager Potion?” he asked.

Snape nodded. It was not time to push him on talking, he thought. Not yet.

But he did not believe that Harry was right. If nothing else, he had left enemies alive behind him, and that was not a Slytherin thing to do. And there should be justice, at least, if there could not be vengeance. And there was always the chance, faint though it seemed right now, that the Wizengamot might someday force Harry back into the control of his blood parents.

Snape’s gaze strayed often as they worked, going to the cauldron of clear Pensieve Potion in the corner of the room. Not in a glass container, it was not yet ready to record memories, and Snape would not have used it on Harry anyway. But on a willing person who wanted to see Harry’s mother suffer, and who knew more than Snape did about what she’d said?

I shall have to see whether Draco is willing to give me some of his memories.

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Rufus lifted his head from a half-doze and blinked. The tower was ringing like a plucked bell, and there were no empty perches now. The last of the voting owls had returned, then.

He nodded at Amelia, who stood up and said, “Release the ballots.”

Responding to the voice of a candidate, the owls opened their beaks and contracted their bellies. Ballots rained out of them, flying into two neat, precise piles. One would bear his name, Rufus knew, and the other Amelia’s name.

In silence, they counted the ballots, each taking their own pile first. Rufus felt his heart speeding up when he passed two thousand, but he kept quiet. He recorded the final number by carving it on the floor of the Tower with his wand when he was done.

Six thousand eight hundred two.

Then he moved over to Amelia’s pile, while she moved over to his, and they counted again. Amelia had five thousand six hundred nine votes.

Rufus felt an odd light-headedness welling up in him, though he’d both eaten and slept since they climbed up to the Tower,
and he’d expected, partly, to win. He leaned back, took a deep breath, carved his estimated number of her votes into the floor, and then shifted the pile of ballots to the side so that he could see Amelia’s number. It was off by a few, but only by ones, not tens. She agreed mostly with him.

The owls uttered a faint, chiming hoot, signaling that the acceptable procedure had been fulfilled. Then they turned to face Rufus, bowed their heads to him, and froze in place until the next time they would be needed.

He looked over the ballots and found Amelia smiling gently at him.

“Congratulations, Rufus,” she said, and rose from the floor, groaning as she popped a muscle in her back. “I think I knew it would happen. Not everyone voted, of course, but your victory is decisive.” She held out a hand, and Rufus strode over to assist her. “Which of those changes you were talking about are you going to implement first?” If she felt any disappointment, she hid it well.

Rufus lingered a moment, to look at the owls and then stare out over the lights of Muggle London. His heart was beating fast, and he still could not quite believe he was the new Minister of Magic.

Then he thought of the changes Amelia spoke of, and he smiled, and he believed it.

“First,” he said casually, “I’m sacking Kingsley Shacklebolt. He’s put loyalty to a Lord above loyalty to the Ministry or the law, and the one thing I am not going to have is Lords mucking about in my Ministry.”

Amelia laughed at him. Rufus didn’t see why. It really was his Ministry, now, and people had to learn that he had no truck with Lords.

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Chapter Forty-One: Spikes in the Head

“I can’t do it.” Weasley’s whining voice grated on the ears, Draco thought, as he sat on one of the desks and swung his legs back and forth. He, of course, had performed the spell that Harry was trying to show the others right the first time. His major entertainment now was watching Weasley, rolling his eyes, and trying to get Harry to roll his eyes along with him. He was irritated that Harry so far appeared inclined to do anything but that.

“Sure you can, Ron.” Harry’s voice was patient. He reached out, gently scooped Weasley’s wand out of his hand, examined it a minute, and then chuckled. “That’s it. You weren’t holding it with the right tension in your wrist. Try again, but this time make your hand tense.” He gave it back, and Weasley clumsily tried to manhandle his wand into the correct position, which Draco had learned just by watching Harry.

He watched Harry now, and calmed himself down by remembering that Harry couldn’t possibly understand how his closeness to Weasley and some of his remarks might be interpreted—as flirting. Weasley didn’t seem to take it that way, thank Merlin, but then, his gaze was always tracking Granger and that insufferable prat Smith. Smith was whispering in Granger’s ear. She laughed. Draco had to admit she had a nice laugh, or he would have admitted it if he were interested in anyone but Harry. Weasley seethed with poorly concealed jealousy. Harry, oblivious Harry, went right on showing Weasley what he had done wrong with the spell.

“There,” he said, stepping away. “Try it now.”

Weasley gestured forward with his wand. “Incendioso!”

This time, a cloud of fire sprang out of the tip of his wand and grew quickly, rolling around in several directions before it hit the wards Harry had set up to protect the furniture. Harry did a nonverbal Finite Incantatem before turning to grin at Weasley. “There you go! That wasn’t so hard after all, was it?”

Weasley blinked stupidly at his wand. “No, I guess not,” he said, and then darted another glance at Granger and Smith. His jealousy went back to blasting like raw, cold wind across Draco’s face. Draco was just as grateful that he couldn’t feel his own jealousy over Harry, not when it was one of the more unpleasant sensations.

Harry leaned back against the desk nearest Weasley and smiled at him. On his way to smile at Smith and Granger, he caught
Draco’s eyes, and his expression widened into a grin.

*That’s it*, Draco decided. He’d felt far too much of Harry’s slowly bleeding emotions these past few weeks, as Harry struggled to bury what had happened at Christmas and Draco struggled to get him to talk about it. Harry wouldn’t do it, but in the meantime, he felt pain and self-doubt and other emotions that made Draco wish he had the Muggle bitch in front of him, promise to Harry or no promise. He didn’t know that he was assaulting Draco’s empathy the way he was. Now, with his happiness beaming out of him in a rush of pleasure that nearly weakened Draco’s limbs, the difference was palpable, and he should always be that happy, or at least he should have a fair chance.

*I’ll need to tell him*. They would have some quiet time in the morning, since it was Saturday and Vince always went to breakfast early on Saturday, to feast on the more abundant food, while Blaise had been spending every spare weekend minute with his little crush lately. Harry would find it hard to pretend that Draco was feeling someone else’s emotions when they were alone in the bedroom.

“All right, Hermione, Zacharias?”

“Of course, Harry,” drawled Smith, putting his chin on Granger’s shoulder. She blushed. Draco sneered. *That does nothing for her complexion.* “I think it’s Malfoy that’s having trouble.”

Harry turned towards him, eyebrows raised, concern washing from him like the scent of honeysuckle.

Draco half-closed his eyes to enjoy the sensation, barely hearing the answers he gave to Harry’s questions. *Maybe it’s time to tell him something else important, too.*

******

*Harry dreamed.*

“But, my lord, I don’t understand.” That was a desperate whine that Harry had already come to associate with Rabastan, for all that he didn’t dream about the man very often. He was shivering on the floor in front of Voldemort’s makeshift throne now. Harry thought they were in the same house as the one Voldemort had chosen for his conversation with Rosier and Bellatrix before sending Rosier to kill Lucius Malfoy, but this was a different room. Rather than having a comfortable fireplace before which the Dark Lord and his snake could relax, it was high-arched and felt cold, with a dim ceiling showing far above their heads. Nagini was slithering restlessly about, and for all that Harry knew he was safe and not really there, he drew back into the shadows each time she slid past the doorway where he crouched.

“I did not expect you to.” Voldemort’s voice was growing angrier. “I expect you to *obey*, Rabastan.”

“But it is—“ Rabastan abruptly stopped his complaint. Harry edged to the side a bit, keeping a wary eye on Nagini, and saw the way the Death Eater had his eyes clenched shut, shivering, as though he had just escaped saying something fatal.

“Yes, Rabastan?” Voldemort hissed a command in Parseltongue, and Nagini swayed eagerly to his side. “You had something to say?”

“No, my lord,” Rabastan whispered. “It is a brilliant plan. Of course it is. And of course I will succeed at it.”

“I do hope so, Rabastan,” said Voldemort. “Considering that you have a month to prepare, and that you will have no other duties in that time, I expect this to be carried off *perfectly*. On certain things, we must wait on the sun—“ a mad laugh “—but in others, we may have our own way. There is nothing quite like causing our enemies worry and pain, would you agree?”

“No, my lord.” Rabastan dared to lift his head and give Voldemort a sickly smile. “Nothing like it.”

Voldemort was silent for a moment, and Harry wondered what he was thinking. Nagini appeared to conclude that he had no more tasks for her, and uncoiled from the side of the chair like a restless whip, crossing the floor with liquid speed.

She came towards the doorway where Harry crouched in his animal shape.

Harry opened his mouth and hissed, but he kept the noise soundless. He had no reason for the fear suddenly making his body tremble. No one in the dreams had ever shown a sign of realizing he was there. Granted, he hadn’t touched any of them, but
since they had no reason to suspect an intruder, they didn’t go out of their way to brush into random corners, either. Nagini had reached the doorway, but was using her long body to describe figure eights in front of it. She showed no inclination to venture further.

Harry continued to watch her, since Voldemort stayed silent. Nagini’s tongue flicked out and tasted the air.

Then she paused, her body stiffening as though it had turned to marble. Harry felt his heartbeat pick up, shaking his small body as it could never shake his normal human one.

Nagini turned her head towards him, slowly, and hissed. Harry knew she would have no reason to suspect that anyone other than her Lord could understand the message she gave. “There is an intruder here in dream-form, Lord. Not quite a ghost, but not quite an imaginary presence, either.”

“Rabastan!” said Voldemort. Harry crouched, his claws shot. He growled, and this time didn’t bother to keep the sound noiseless. Nagini didn’t seem to hear him, but she slid closer, and her tongue flicked again, and this time her hiss would have been a foul obscenity if she were speaking in English.

“My lord?” Harry could see Rabastan lift his head, though he didn’t dare take his eyes off Nagini in order to observe his expression. The great snake slithered closer and closer to him, flinging loops of her body over the floor. Harry crouched lower.

“There is an intruder here,” Voldemort said. “Nagini says so. Follow her, find him, and kill him for me.”

“As my lord commands.” Rabastan sounded startled, but eager. He came around the chair with his wand drawn, and Harry knew that he could cast curses which would hurt him if they landed.

Harry decided, reluctantly, that he would learn nothing of any further use tonight. He was better off backing out of the dream. He turned, waited until Nagini’s head looked a bit to the right of him, and then sprang into the air as he had when he tore the dream to shreds so that he could warn the Malfoys. His claws reached out and rent—

Air. He fell back to the room of the deserted house with a thump.

This time, Nagini seemed to feel the vibrations. She pointed her head at him and uttered a long, satisfied hiss, then lay down on the floor and came straight for him. Rabastan followed, casting a few hexes to the left and right of Nagini for the look of things.

Unsure, despairing, Harry sat up and tried as best as he could to ready himself for battle in an unfamiliar body, against an enemy whose capabilities to hurt him in this form he knew nothing about.

I really do need help.

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

Harry turned his head sharply. Draco stood beside him.

******

Draco had felt pain for some time, but it hadn’t been quite strong enough to bring him permanently awake. He kept rising to the surface of his sleep, muttering, blinking, resolving to get out of bed and wake Harry up, and then sliding back beneath the surface. He could wake Harry in the morning. Harry didn’t even like to talk about his dreams; he’d gone right back to incommunicative silence on that as on most other things. It drove Draco mad, but if Harry would just turn his back on sincere concern anyway, there was no reason for him to lose sleep over it.

Then he felt a surge of pain and panic, and he reached out. His empathy located the emotions in Harry, and he wanted to soothe them if he could.

Unlike most other times, he didn’t encounter conscious barriers when he reached out towards Harry. He always knew which were his own feelings and which were someone else’s; he had been careful to concentrate on that when the first books he studied mentioned how often empaths were lost in a whirlwind of emotions and had their minds tangled with their unwilling
targets’. This time, though, he slid across what seemed no more than empty air and through a wall of swirling mist, and then he opened his eyes and saw what Harry saw.

They stood in an abandoned house, with just enough light to see by; Draco couldn’t tell if it came from a spell or a distant fire. In front of them was a dark floor with an immense snake moving over it, and a wizard following her. And beside him was Harry, thinking, I really do need help.

“Why didn’t you say so before?” Draco asked aloud in exasperation, and then looked at Harry, who was staring back at him. He blinked. Harry wasn’t human here, but a grayish cat with long, nervously shifting legs. His feet bristled with fur, as though he were about to go sliding through snow. His black-tufted ears turned towards the sound of Draco’s voice, and a short, black-tufted tail lashed back and forth in shock.

Draco didn’t have time to question why Harry was in animal form here. The snake seemed to lose whatever trouble she had with sensing them, and slid forward. The wizard behind her, whose face Draco didn’t recognize, lifted his wand and cast a curse at them that Draco most definitely did recognize.

If he can use his wand in a dream, then I can, Draco thought, and found his wand just where he had left it when he’d gone to sleep, tucked into the waistband of his robe. He drew it and cast the spell that Harry had taught them today. “Incendioso!”

The fire spread out ahead of him and consumed the curse the wizard was flinging; that was its primary function. The wizard cursed, slowed, and began skirting them, obviously trying to figure out some spell that would get past the guard of this stranger, and how the stranger had got here in the first place.

Draco turned to grin down at Harry, only to realize that Harry was no longer at his side. He had jumped, and now he was riding the snake’s back, his mouth and his paws clamped on its body, biting and kicking and stabbing. The snake let out a shriek and reared back, trying to crush him in its coils.

Draco took a step forward and aimed his wand, carefully, but was forced to lower it. There was no way that he wasn’t going to hit Harry, with both cat and snake writhing and hissing and growling all over the floor. He had to try something else, and he thought he knew what he should try.

He had to take care of the wizard first, though, and he spun to face him. “Speculum Ardoris!” He didn’t think this fool would know how to destroy Harry’s version of the spell right away, and from the startled oath he gave as the Flame Mirror popped up around him, he was right.

Draco turned and ran like hell for the snake. He probably needed to be near to try what he was going to try.

The hall wavered around him several times—Harry trying to wake up, Draco guessed. Then it firmed, and Harry shrieked in pain. Draco looked up sharply to see the snake’s fangs caught in his shoulder.

Draco panicked, but beat it back. A fearful empath was one of the things that his books had taught him to fear. He would pick up more emotions in such a sensitive state, and spiral further and further towards losing himself. He would have to act now.

He reached out and slid through the barriers between his own mind and those of Harry’s again, surging into a sea of emotions. They were so familiar that he could orient himself easily. His own emotions, Harry’s in their strength and power, and another set of them, quite close and busily at work.

Draco thought quickly, I’m in Harry’s mind, in his dream. Everyone else is in his dream, too, however real it must be. And that means that I ought to be able to reach their minds, too, by virtue of being inside his mind already and sharing dream-space with them.

It was a weak theory, but it was the best one Draco had, and he acted on it, sliding out of Harry’s mind and into the snake’s.

It worked. Draco could feel the emotions churning around him, anger and fear and protectiveness towards her master, and he knew her name, Nagini, and he knew that a few more bites would subdue this strange cat and bring him before her master. Her master had not sensed the intruder, but she had. Wonder surged, suspicion as to how many times he had watched.

A snake’s emotions were simpler than a human’s, Draco found. He was almost reading her thoughts, which was something that didn’t happen with Harry or anyone else he had practiced his empathy on.
She could sense Harry. Harry’s dreams about visiting the Dark Lord were probably not going to stop any time soon.

That meant she needed to die.

Draco took a deep breath and reached for his wand. He hoped his physical movements were working, since he couldn’t see or sense to guide his body; his own sensations were all bound up in Nagini’s mind. “Defensor vindictae,” he said, the same Dark defensive spell he had used when Harry fought the dragons.

The black force surged around him. Draco knew the eyes were watching him, waiting for a command, but he couldn’t see them. He could only clasp his hands into fists and then smash them together, indicating that the spell was to crush Nagini to death if it was at all possible.

He felt the spell move forward, a wave of freezing pressure, and then begin to work. Nagini felt pain. Draco felt it, too, but he thought he could bear it. He was too caught up in his own savage joy at protecting Harry to worry much about it.

Then claws hooked into his thigh, and someone hissed urgently near his ear, and he was dragged out and up and away through a madly flickering hall. Draco cried out in protest. If they left now, then he couldn’t know for certain if Nagini would die.

A sharp yank, and an even sharper pain from below, and then they had broken the surface and were rising steadily out of the realm of sleep.

******

Harry was swearing even before he sat up and blinked away the usual flow of blood coming from his scar. He swabbed furiously at it, then rolled over and out of the bed. He could hear Draco’s curtains rustling. He cast a Silencing Charm around the area with a wave of his hand. They didn’t need any witnesses to what was about to happen.

“Draco!” he said.

“Harry!” Draco said back, in almost the identical tone, as he tumbled out of his own bed and stood blinking on the cold stone floor.

Harry stepped onto one of the thick rugs, hoping Draco would follow suit. He had already hurt Draco badly enough when he dragged him into his dream. He didn’t need him getting frostbite on top of that.

“What in the name of Merlin did you think you were doing?” he yelled. He resisted the urge to wave his arms, though suddenly he understood why people made the gesture. At least it let some of the excess emotion go. “I can’t believe that you took that risk! You could have died, and in a place that I didn’t even know was real or not, and if you’d stayed in her mind when she died, then you definitely would have died, you moron! Don’t you know anything about your own empathy?”

“I know that I’ve been feeling your emotions bleeding through your damn stoic exterior for three weeks now!” Draco yelled back at him. His face was flushed, his eyes glittering with tears. It was a little like the look he had given Harry after receiving his Christmas gift, but Harry was pretty sure the opposite feelings to those of generosity and joy motivated Draco now. “And I can’t say anything about it because you won’t fucking talk about it! And now you’ve been having dangerous dreams, and you could have died, too, and you needed my help, and you’re regretting the danger you involved me in? This wouldn’t have happened if you’d just—“

Abruptly, his face changed, and he reached out insistently, pulling at the shoulder of Harry’s pyjama top. Bewildered, Harry let him, and saw only relief on Draco’s face. He looked down, and saw unbroken skin.

“She bit you,” Draco breathed. “I thought the wounds might have come with you from the dream.” Then he frowned. “Does that mean that I didn’t really kill Nagini, since I only did it in the dream?”

“I heard Voldemort hiss as we left,” Harry said. He didn’t want to reveal this, in case it inspired Draco to try further moronic exploits in his dreams, but he didn’t think he could lie, either. “He was calling for her. If she wasn’t dead, she was at least so badly wounded that he couldn’t contact her mind anymore, or use whatever version of the familiar bond really exists between them.”
Draco beamed smugly at him. Harry was preparing words to take the beam away when his eyes narrowed and he said, “And you are the one who was having insanely dangerous dreams and never bothered to tell me about them.”

“That never happened before!” Harry argued, fighting the urge to back away from the murderous rage on Draco’s face. “That was the first time she sensed me. I swear. I don’t know what was so different this time.”

“Yes, well, if I killed her, it won’t happen again.” Draco reached out and caught Harry’s hand in a death grip. “I didn’t choose to jump into the dream. I felt your pain, and I was swept in when I tried to comfort you. That means that you don’t need to blame yourself, Harry. But it means that we’re connected, too. You can’t deny that any more. You can’t set up some barrier to keep me out.” He was speaking quickly, as though he thought Harry would manage to convince him otherwise if he allowed him to talk. “I think it would be better if I know exactly what’s going on in your dreams, so that I can defend myself if I’m going to be a regular guest in them. And I think it’d be best if you tell me exactly why you’re still bleeding emotions all over the place, weeks after you claimed you were healed of what that bitch of a woman did to you.”

“I did ask you not to talk about her,” said Harry, turning his head away, preparing to draw his emotions in after him. He thought he’d found a way to block some of Draco’s empathy and give him peace, a variation on the Occlumency barriers that Snape used to keep Voldemort from reading his thoughts.

Draco grabbed his shoulders and shook him. The physical effort definitely distracted Harry from putting up barriers, and he glared at Draco. Draco caught and held his eyes with an intensity that Harry couldn’t remember seeing from his friend before.

“I feel those emotions anyway,” Draco snapped at him. “I can feel the barrier you’ve been using, Harry, but it’s not enough.”

“Then I don’t understand what you want me to do!” Harry twisted in Draco’s grasp, trying to get away. He could feel the panic rising. If he leaned back, if he let himself take comfort, there was the possibility that he might break down. And if he broke down, then he would have to let some of his emotions go. And if he let some of his emotions go, then there was the possibility that he might encounter that sadism he knew now lay just under the surface of his conscious thoughts.

“Talk to me,” said Draco, pulling him towards him so that Harry’s head rested on his shoulder. “Heal the wounds, and then they won’t be bleeding anymore, and I won’t feel bad, and you won’t, either.” His hand skimmed Harry’s back, so lightly that for a moment Harry hoped he’d let him go, but then it tightened. “It’s so practical, Harry. Whether or not I loved you, I’d want to do this, as long as I had the empathy, so that we’d both stop feeling bad. Surely you can see that? Surely you can see it’s only the sensible thing to do?”

Harry twisted again. He was still a bit shorter than Draco, though not by much anymore, but he had some training in physical fighting that Draco didn’t. If he could only get the right half of his body completely free, and stop the stupid tears now blinding him, he could run away.

Draco murmured in his ear, “Come on, Harry. I can feel what you’re suffering.” He sounded as if he were about to start sobbing himself. “I know that you don’t care about your own pain, but you care about other people’s, don’t you? I know that you wouldn’t want to go on inflicting wounds on me, even if they’re the kind of wounds that no one else can see.”

Harry didn’t know when he’d started to cry, but it terrified him. Panic and sorrow were wild emotions, like rage. He might end up summoning that deadly rage again if he pursued these emotions long enough.


“I’m trying!” Harry struggled furiously to regain his self-control. He could do it. He had to be able to do it, if he wasn’t to explode in some shameful way again. He couldn’t believe what he’d done to his mother, once he regained some perspective. What she’d said to him was awful, but how did striking back with his magic, which she didn’t have any of any more, make him any better than she was? How would wielding his magic over less powerful wizards make him any better than Voldemort? And he’d known, he’d known, that talking about things like this would send him dangerously close to the emotional edge. His mother’s letters had had the power to do that. So it was better not to talk about her, or about anything that had happened that night, and then he wouldn’t let his magic loose in an orgy of either fury or self-blame.

And no one else will stare at me, either, in pity or disgust. That would be good. And no one will try to hurt her. It would be one thing if they would just confine themselves to hurting me, but they would hurt her, too. I can’t let this go on spreading.
But it appeared that he’d been hurting Draco while thinking he’d protected him, and that just encouraged him to cry further.

_I don’t know what to do. No matter which way I turn, I’m going to hurt someone, or encourage someone to get hurt._

“Hush, Harry. I’ve got you.”

Harry clawed his way out of the maelstrom of his emotions by focusing on physical sensation. That sensation was Draco’s arms locked on him, one around his waist, one around his upper back. They were sitting on the floor, leaning against the skirt of Draco’s bed. Draco cradled him so close there was no way that he would miss the tremors shaking Harry, and whispered into his ear. At first it was those same few words, over and over, but when Harry looked up at him, knowing his own face was probably sick with fear and confusion, they altered.

“I promise, _I promise_, that I won’t do whatever it is that you fear I’m going to do. Cause pain to other people, isn’t it? I promise, Harry, I—” Draco shuddered as though the words were torn out of him. “I promise by Merlin and my magic not to hurt your mother, never to hurt her. If that’s what you need to be safe with me and trust me, I promise it.”

Harry blinked. Stunned surprise slid over his emotions and numbed all of them for a moment. That had been something he wanted, and thought none of his allies would ever give, so it was useless and stupid to request it from them against their wills.

Then relief crawled like sunlight where the surprise had been, and melted away its mist. Harry felt his breathing calm. He stopped struggling, and studied Draco’s face for a moment. He no longer felt as if he were about to destroy the room with his magic. “Why?” he asked quietly.

“Because you matter more to me than she does.” Draco arched an eyebrow, as if Harry had asked him in what direction the sun rose. The silent of _course_ was so strong that Harry could feel it ringing in the chambers of his skull. “I won’t pretend to like her, but it’s obvious to me now that you’re not trusting anyone because you fear your revelations might just encourage that person to get angrier against your mother. So just cast her out of the equation. It’s not like she matters. Besides, I heard everything, Harry. So you don’t need to tell me about it. I just want to speak with you about it, and hopefully prevent pain to both of us.” He met Harry’s eyes full-on, his own eyelids fluttering with nervousness. “I swear, you matter more to me than anything or anyone else.”

“Even with the Dark magic that I poured out that night?” Harry whispered.

“You _prat_,” said Draco, and then hugged him tightly enough to grind breath out from between Harry’s ribs. “You were worried about _that_? Of course I was afraid, but I was afraid for you and not _of_ you. You must have known that, or you wouldn’t have come back to us at all.”

Harry closed his eyes. Perhaps, perhaps, just perhaps, if it was like this, he could speak without perfect self-control and not cause a magical disaster in doing so. “I’m so tired, Draco,” he whispered. “Tired of pretending nothing’s wrong, tired of thinking about what people would think of me if they realized that surge of Dark magic was me and I wanted so badly to _hurt_ someone else, tired of worrying about what will happen to my mother if I do say something to Snape or Hawthorn or your mother.”

“You don’t have to be.” Draco’s voice was low, but Harry thought he could have heard it if trumpets were sounding in the room. “You have at least one person who’s sworn that he won’t hurt Lily, Harry. And I’m not afraid of anything you tell me. I never will be.”

Harry swallowed. He thought, somewhere under the spinning chaos that occupied the surface of his mind, that he shouldn’t let Draco give him this. It was too big a sacrifice. How could Draco possibly care for him _more_ than _anything_ else? What about his parents, his own life, his own future that he would have after the War that Harry fully expected he himself would die in?

But he needed it too much, at the moment, to reject it. And the thought of having someone whose loyalty was to him first was…

_Too attractive to give up right now._

“Thank you,” he whispered, and relaxed. Exhaustion was creeping over him. “But do we have to talk about it right now?”
“No,” Draco said. “So long as you understand that we will talk about this, Harry, and that you can’t get away from it by pretending that you’ve forgotten what happened when we wake up.”

“I know that,” Harry whispered. He was drowning in rich warmth. The terror of trusting someone else was somewhere beneath that, like gulfs of space through rays of sunlight. “Do we have to move?”

Draco laughed in his ear. “We do, or we’ll both have cricks in our necks in the morning. Up you get.”

He shifted Harry without taking away from the warmth, somehow, and crawled into his bed with him. Fawkes was sitting on the edge of the mattress this time, and radiated warmth at them, coruscating gold touched with blue. Harry felt his eyes slide relentlessly closed. He didn’t think he would have any dreams this time, either visions of Voldemort or the more ordinary nightmares he’d had of the confrontation with Lily.


Harry turned his face towards him without opening his eyes. “You’ll be here?”

Draco’s voice this time was, for some reason, fiercely triumphant. “I’ll be here, Harry. I promise.”

“Good,” said Harry, and drifted away on waves of fire and phoenix song. Fawkes was crooning a lullaby that gave Harry visions of golden chicks hatching from scarlet eggs, and singing to greet the dawn.

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Imperio.

Harry stiffened his shoulders, but kept walking. He could feel the Imperius Cruse drifting about his head. This wasn’t the first time it had happened in a few weeks, but always before, it had faded immediately, as though it had only been a test run. Harry was sure that this was the same person who had cast the Curse to madden the dragons in the First Task, and he wanted to see if he could track down who it was, this time.

He caught a glimpse of a shadow following him, and when the voice in his head said, *Turn into the side room and wait*, he did so. The shadow strode in confidently a few moments later.

*Moody. Rosier said to beware of him.*

Harry stood as if passive under the Curse, breathing softly, letting Moody examine him. Moody shook his head after a moment.

“Can’t tell why it’s so important to know everything about you,” he muttered to himself. “You’d think the Ministry would have learned their lesson already, and there’s been enough demonstrations at Hogwarts to fill a bloody Prophet all by themselves. Why?” He began walking around Harry at a slow pace, examining him again. Harry listened, in hopes of finding out what he was up to, but Moody only muttered generalities, without revealing whether he really was connected to Voldemort somehow, or to Fudge, or to someone else.

Harry caught sight of the gleam of the silver collar around his neck, and suspected it would be useless to try Legilimency on Moody himself.

*And I can’t talk to Snape about it because I don’t want him doing anything stupid, and it’s useless trying to talk to Dumbledore about anything. Who can I tell about this, someone who will promise to go at my own pace, until we can figure out what’s really happening?*

The thought hit him hard enough to make him smile, and Moody paused and stared at him.

*Draco, of course.*

Harry let his eyes blink, and he looked up at Moody and asked in a voice that he kept deliberately calm, “What are you doing here, sir?”
Moody pulled his wand at once and aimed it. “Obliviate.”

Harry bounced and destroyed the Memory Charm on his Occlumency shields as he had when Lockhart tried to use it on him in second year, but pretended to the glazed eyes and gaping mouth that Moody would expect from the Charm. The professor studied him for a moment, then grunted. “Enough wandering around the halls, Potter,” he said. “Go back to your common room now.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said in a dazed tone, and trotted off, glancing back only once. Moody was sipping from the flask that hung at his hip, and frowning.

*I hope Draco’s there*, Harry thought, walking faster. *Maybe it is a bit selfish, but I like having someone else to tell about these things.*

******

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Draco opened Snape’s office door and peered warily around it at his Head of House.

“Yes, Draco.” Snape didn’t bother pretending to courtesy or shyness. “It’s about Mr. Potter. Come in and sit down.”

Draco nodded, shut the door, and walked over to the chair in front of the desk. At once, Snape set a clear bottle of silvery potion in front of him. Draco eyed it, then squinted at Snape. He knew it wasn’t a kind of potion that he’d seen before, and he could say that with certainty. He was one of Snape’s better students.

“This is a Pensieve Potion, a recent invention of mine.” Snape folded his hands in front of him. “The Ministry has approved its use. In a glass bottle such as this, it will capture strong memories from the mind of another person, as directed by its creator. It can happen without the consent or knowledge of the person involved, but I would like you to know what I am doing, and to give me your permission. I want your memories of the night that Lily Potter came here, and what she said to Harry.”

Draco blinked. “What do you intend to do with them, sir?”

Snape’s eyes turned darker, and Draco fought the urge to shrink back in his chair. He’d seen his father in these moods, too, but, maybe because Lucius was more familiar to him, he didn’t seem as purely *Death Eater* as Snape did in this moment. “For right now? Perhaps nothing. But I do not think it is wise to let Lily Potter go without paying for what she has done.”

Draco felt a brief surge of longing. He could imagine the kinds of things that Snape wanted the memories for. He could imagine Lily drawn and quartered in front of the wizarding world—it was a shame that literal drawing and quartering wasn’t practiced anymore, he thought, because it would make a fit punishment for her—and his body fluttered with pleasure at the image.

*It’s too bad. It’s really too bad.*

Draco met Snape’s eyes and said, “No, sir.”

Snape blinked, and his surprise traveled in an icy breeze across Draco’s face. “And why not?” he asked after a moment, voice descending to a snapping hiss. “I thought you would have been quite as eager to see justice done for Harry as I am.”

“I am, sir,” Draco said. “But I’m more interested in seeing mercy done to him, and he needs the mercy of knowing that someone would never turn against him, in any way. I’ve sworn to be that person.”

Snape cocked his head to the side. “If he took that oath from you under duress, Draco, you are in no need of keeping it.”

Draco narrowed his eyes and rose from his chair. “How dare you,” he said, noting in only mild shock that Snape had flinched. “How dare you think he is capable of anything like that. I gave this oath of my own free will. I am keeping it of my own free will. Find someone else to give you your memories. I won’t turn against Harry like that. No, not even for his own good,” he added, as Snape’s mouth opened. “Goodbye, sir. I’m not telling him about this right now, because he doesn’t need the added stress of knowing his guardian’s an idiot, but if you try anything without my or his consent, and I find out about it, I won’t have any compunctions.”
He shut the door hard behind him on his way out.

Chapter Forty-Two: Neither Snape Nor Harry Are Best Pleased

You must tread carefully.

Snape had heard that advice many times in his life—not always in those words, but the fancier words that most Slytherins brewed in their adult lives always boiled down to that warning. Tread carefully, or he’d be caught. Tread carefully, or he would give away what he wanted and bring in some stronger rival to defend it. Tread carefully, or he’d show his enemies what he was up to, and they would block it just to spite him. Tread carefully, or the Marauders would find and catch him.

“Severus, what is that disgusted expression on your face for?”

Snape snapped his eyes around to the side. McGonagall is too perceptive for her own good. “Nothing,” he said smoothly. “At least, nothing more than it is every day. Do you not become disgusted at the thought of teaching good-for-nothing brats who will never learn more than the basic rudiments of your art?”

McGonagall lifted her head. That was better, Snape thought. He preferred her when she played the part of the offended Gryffindor to that of the woman who had been almost put in his House. Gryffindors have no business seeing so clearly. “Transfiguration is a different kind of art than Potions, Severus, and you know it. Most of Potions is only following directions. But a student has to have a true passion to learn Transfiguration, and a keen eye to keep all the parts of an object or creature in mind.”

“If my art has less passion involved than yours, mine must at least be precise.” Snape finished the last of his juice and stood. He had never truly liked pumpkin juice, but he had become accustomed to drinking it for breakfast over the years. The last thing he wanted to do now was draw attention, and Dumbledore would notice if he stopped drinking it. “And that is the reason that so many of your little lion cubs stumble and fall when it comes to their OWL’s.”

McGonagall glared at him and muttered something about a snake poisoning their efforts, but Snape affected not to hear, and swept effortlessly on. Dumbledore’s eyes were on his back the whole way.

Of course they were. I trod too heavily that night in his office when Harry confronted him.

That time was nearly a month ago now, with the last days of January trickling past, and still Snape had not thought of a way to use his Pensieve Potion, or to make the man pay. Without the memories from either Draco or Harry, he was effectively stuck. No one else had seen as much. No one knew as much. He would get the images from James or Lily Potter only by force, and he had good reasons for avoiding them—Lily because of his promise to Harry, James because he did not think he would be able to control his wand once he was in the same room with the fool.

It must be done, though, he thought, as he entered his classroom and heard the muffled snorts and giggles of the Gryffindors calm immediately. They knew he was never in a good mood during this double class with the Slytherins, and tried not to provoke him. They didn’t seem to have learned yet that he didn’t need provocation to take points from them.

He turned to face the class, and noticed Harry and Draco sitting near the front, side by side. That was a good sign, at least. Harry had worked by himself when they still regularly fought. Now he looked at Draco occasionally as if trying to guess when the other boy would come to his senses and run away, but he had at least one person to speak and listen to.

Snape had to admit that he wished that person could have been him, but he had made mistakes, and it would take Harry some time to trust him again. He was willing to wait.

You have made still other mistakes. You have not told him about the compulsion the book put on Draco yet.

Snape stilled his face, and snapped, “You will make the potion on page 53 of your text. Instructions are there. Begin.”

He began stalking around the classroom, using the time to watch faces. Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode stood at once and went to fetch their ingredients together, Pansy listening intently to something Millicent was saying. The Bulstrode
girl often found herself agitated lately, Snape knew. It was only natural, with her mother due to produce another child at the 
end of February. Pureblood pregnancies were rare and treasured things.

Vincent Crabbe leaned towards Blaise to share the instructions with him. Then he went to get the necessary materials. Blaise 
took the time to watch Harry and Draco. Snape had not yet reasoned out the complex expression that came over his face at 
such moments. He did not think the boy was jealous of the bond the two shared—if nothing else, he had a proclaimed 
girlfriend in the youngest Weasley spawn—but he did believe Blaise was weighing where his opportunities lay.

Not only Slytherins did that, Snape saw, as Harry stood in turn and a few Gryffindor heads pivoted to track him, the 
purebloods mostly. He had returned to find his charge at the center of more and more glances lately, the sun to capture more 
and more planets.

Draco surged up beside Harry. Snape permitted himself a small smile. The boy had not yet told Harry of his crush, or Snape 
believed he would have known it, but he was not inclined to pursue the deadline he had set on the telling. It was surprising 
enough that Draco had persisted in these feelings, when Snape had expected them to dissipate into the atmosphere.

*Let things take their course. I do not believe that I can hurry them or change them. On the other hand, I believe Draco must 
give over soon. Normal people do not find true love at fourteen years old.*

Were Harry and Draco normal?

*Draco more normal than Harry, assuredly,* Snape thought, as he finished pacing to the end of the classroom and turned 
around, *but I will not let my own personal consideration of them end with my thinking they are too extraordinary. I might 
start uncritically believing everything they say otherwise, and I cannot let that happen. Harry needs a parent. Draco needs 
someone who will not be carried away by his name and the thought of what his father once did. Both need limitations.*

He paused abruptly as he began to make his way up past the Gryffindor tables. Connor Potter stared at him in silent, mute 
consideration, Weasley in open defiance. The Gryffindors were not entirely reconciled to having him back as their Potions 
teacher yet.

Two unconnected things had suddenly rolled together in Snape’s mind, in a way they only had a habit of doing when he was 
in the middle of a potion.

“Five points from Gryffindor for having an expression unsuitable for addressing a professor on your face, Weasley,” he said, 
to show that his pause had a point, and went on walking towards the front of the classroom.

*Limitations. Yes.*

*It will take some work, but not so much as all that. I believe one advantage I have in this dance is that my partner is all too 
willling to guide my faltering steps, and believe they come only from weakness and not some overarching plan. He is too used 
to believing that he controls everything and everyone.*

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“Severus! Come in, my dear boy, come in.”

Snape could hear the pleased tone in the Headmaster’s voice. Dumbledore would believe that he was luring him back, since, 
after all, Snape had requested this interview of his own free will.

*Come,* Snape told himself. *It won’t do to be too eager. And you must meet his eyes at some points during the conversation, or 
he really will start suspecting that you have something to hide.*

“Headmaster,” he muttered, taking care to sound as though only necessity had forced him to the title, and he hated it. He 
darted his head up in a quick gesture, and then brought his eyes back down again as he all but slunk to a chair in front of the 
desk. He had some practice in radiating resentment and even hatred of his lot, and he knew Dumbledore would be drinking in 
those emotions, believing them all the more eagerly since he wanted to think that this was the beginning of a revolution in 
Snape’s feelings.

“Please, dear boy, call me Albus.”
Snape sat down, still keeping his head bowed. “I don’t think I’m quite ready for that yet.” To his secret delight, the words were indistinguishable from Connor Potter’s whine when he had given the blasted boy detention for ruining his potion.

Behind his surface emotions, he was raising his Occlumency shields—the shields that had fooled the Dark Lord, a most skilled Legilimens, as to his true allegiances for more than a year. Granted, Snape believed that the Headmaster was better at reading thoughts than the Dark Lord was. On the other hand, that desire to see only what he wanted to see would help blind him.

It was a dance, as so many things in Slytherin life were. And unlike pureblood rituals, this was the kind of dance Snape understood, the kind he was instinctively good at, the kind he thrived on. Idiotic Gryffindors would never believe that Slytherins took risks. They did, though, for the sake of a greater gain that could come from it.

This was of a piece with the risk that Harry had taken for him in the Wizengamot’s courtroom when he went under Veritaserum, and Snape did not believe he could answer that statement of trust and faith with anything less than a similar statement of his own.

He raised his eyes and met Dumbledore’s, bracing himself against the intense rake of that gaze.

He felt the light, probing touches of Legilimency. He rolled with them, deciding from moment to moment whether to open a shield and let Dumbledore through, to pretend not to notice him but keep him out, to notice and take offense. Any choice could be the wrong one, the one that would end the charade.

None of them were. Dumbledore continued to beam at him, and said, “I hope, Severus, that you will someday be ready to call me Albus again.”

Snape sat a long moment in silence, then nodded, slowly. “Perhaps I shall,” he said, and let the hollowness of old conviction and old despair ring in his voice.

He could feel Dumbledore relaxing. This was the Snape he knew, the one he’d dealt with since Snape had fled the Death Eaters and come to him in hope of a last sanctuary. He knew the human weaknesses of that man, the all-too-human faults and flaws and wants of him. He knew that Snape had done his stint as a spy as an act of atonement, but that he also resented Dumbledore for making him do it, when he could have stayed in safety at Hogwarts. There were debts and obligations and duties entangled in the relationship between them, too many to ever be untangled. Dumbledore would believe that the old rope had caught Snape’s neck and was drawing him in again, half-cringing and half-growling, reminding him of how much he owed the old man.

He did not know that Snape’s primary allegiance had changed, and that enabled him to cut the rope without regrets.

“What did you wish to talk to me about?” Dumbledore asked.

Snape blinked, slowly, as though he had lost himself in the past. He turned his head and stared at the far wall. He swallowed. “I wish to know your ultimate intentions regarding my ward,” he whispered.

“Harry Potter, Severus.” Dumbledore’s voice was quick and pleased. “He has a last name. He has living parents. And that is part of your answer, as I am sure you suspected it would be. I intend that Harry someday be reconciled to his parents, if that can be done. I admit that after the fiasco on Christmas—”

That is one name for it.

“—I have less hope of it than ever. But I do not intend that any family be split apart forever. Lily has given so much to the cause of the war against Voldemort, her elder son and her magic included. It was only by a miracle that Poppy managed to save her foot and keep it from joining the list of sacrifices as well. I always meant to give her back the family life she should have had when the war was done. There is every hope, now, that Harry as well as Connor will survive. I would see them living with their mother, peacefully, until they’re of age, and then visiting her and kissing her with grandchildren in their arms someday.”

Not while I live. In the name of Merlin and my magic, I will end the pain.
“And James?” Snape let the name sound as if it were being tugged out of him by a fishhook tangled in his guts. It wasn’t difficult to summon that emotion.

“Ah, yes, James.” Dumbledore sighed. “He has not been in communication with me for months, and so I do not know his mind as well as I could have claimed to, once. But he has given up much, too. You know that, Severus.” Dumbledore sent him a chiding glance Snape didn’t bother answering. “He gave up his position in the Aurors so that he could stay closer to and live with his family, protect them against any Death Eaters hunting them after Tom’s fall.”

_I doubt it_. From the memories Snape had sometimes encountered in Harry’s mind during Occlumency training, he believed it far more likely that James Potter was a coward who had found the wide world too much to deal with. It would account for his shutting himself up in Godric’s Hollow and then shutting himself up again in Lux Aeterna.

“He has not given up as much as Harry.” The emotions that filled his voice were ones that Snape didn’t have to feign, either. He was glad of that. A lie was always stronger when mixed with a bit of truth, the same way that iron forged into steel was stronger than when left alone.

“You continue to say that, Severus, but I do not think you mean it.” Dumbledore leaned coaxingly forward. Snape felt an edge of compulsion in the old wizard’s words, and bounced it with expert smoothness from his shields, winding it down to drown among the quicksilver pools. It was a method that didn’t alert Dumbledore to its having failed. “After all, Harry was a child, and he could not have known what he was giving up. James and Lily were adults. They yielded the whole world to their children, and to living with them and bringing them up a very certain way.”

_His words have almost no effect on me, now_, Snape realized. He had moved beyond Dumbledore’s voice as it seemed he had moved beyond the Dark Lord’s when he left him in heart. The rhetoric that had once seemed so compelling beat against the walls of his mind and rolled down as rain would.

“I have seen Harry’s training, Headmaster. I cannot believe that any result was worth that.”

Dumbledore’s eyes and smile grew brilliant. “Oh, yes, they were. He has such skills as he has never yet needed to call upon, and, more than that, he has the drive to learn that makes sure he will acquire more as he reaches the limits of the ones he has. And now that I believe his mindset has changed and his idea of sacrifice extended to the whole of the wizarding world, I can see where I went wrong. I was attempting to force him to love, and he already does. Even if he is not the fulfillment of the prophecy, he will do great things. Surely you can see, Severus, that any sacrifice was worth it to get him to that point?”

Dumbledore bore down with the heaviest compulsion he had raised yet, a clumsy touch that he would have disdained if he didn’t need to be certain of winning, Snape thought. He hovered beyond it, drowned it, and marveled at how the words did not even raise a spasm of rage within him.

_I have grown beyond that now. I know they are not true, and so there is no need to waste breath or time in fighting them. They are valuable only as a portrait of what Dumbledore is thinking._

“I know that I have often praised his skill in my Potions class,” Snape murmured. It was the kind of admission that Dumbledore would expect him to make, the grudging turn back around to admit the truth of another’s words without actually saying that that person had been right. Dumbledore would see it as the interaction of his compulsion and Snape’s essential personality. Snape did rouse himself enough to add, “That doesn’t mean that he needed to learn _everything_ that he learned.”

“There are lessons I would change,” Dumbledore said. “But in the main, Severus, I think you’ll find that he knows _everything he needs to know._”

_That will be enlightening, when I see it._

“Perhaps,” said Snape, and then roused himself to sneer. “Do you really think that the boy will be brought near his parents again? I do not think he would stand for it. He vowed to tell his father that he did not want to speak with him again, I know.”

Dumbledore winked. “Oh, but I have my sources, Severus, and I know that Harry is still writing steadily back to James. They exchange letters every few days. It is not something, but it is an open connection, and it shows that Harry would be willing to share his life with his blood family if he could be convinced they deserved it. He shall know the full story of his mother soon, I think, whenever he next wishes to contact her, and that should convince him.”
Snapew fought the urge to snarl. *The boy did not tell me he was still writing his fool of a father!*

But he was a Slytherin, and he rose beyond his immediate irritation and looked at the implications of Dumbledore’s words. *A source. Who? I do not believe that my Slytherins would be unaware of one of their fellows coming and going, reporting to Dumbledore about Harry without my knowledge. Someone would have hinted to let me know about it.*

He had the answer in a moment, when he just bothered to exert himself.

*The wards!*

The Headmaster of Hogwarts could listen from the walls and doors of the building, if he wished to. It was not often that one made the effort; the knowledge obtained that way was dizzying, and required constant monitoring, and constant drain on one’s magic. Dumbledore had so many hooks in so many minds that he hadn’t bothered with the wards in years. But, if he chose, he could renew the ties that bound the Headmaster to the school, and no one would know when he was listening from doors or walls, windows or portraits.

Snapew wondered if Dumbledore knew about his plan already, then discarded the idea. He would have to act as if it were unknown, or he was lost. He had kept much of what he plotted in his own head, as it was the best way. And the best way to avoid much more scrutiny was to do exactly what he had done: come to Dumbledore and “prove” he could be trusted.

He looked away from the Headmaster and slipped a tone into his voice that Dumbledore was the only person ever to have heard. “I do not like to think of losing the boy, Headmaster. You know that I don’t often become fond of people, and—” He shook his head as though he had said too much.

“I know, Severus, I know.” Dumbledore leaned across the table and patted his hand. “But family is an important and sacred thing—in Harry’s case especially, when he spent so many years of his life exclusively with them. You would not like to deprive him of them if he made the choice, would you?”

*Yes, I would. If he made the choice to go back to them now, he would obviously be insane, and I would take appropriate steps.*

“No, Headmaster,” Snape whispered.

“I know that you, yourself, had a—more delicate relationship with your mother than you usually acknowledge,” Dumbledore said, with the appropriate pause. “Not that Lily is Harry’s only magical parent, but there are some similarities, I believe.”

*Thank Merlin for Occlumency.* Snape calmly bolted down his rage, his unthinking reaction. *He is trying to shove me off balance. The only thing I need do is not let myself be shoved.*

“I did not hand that knowledge to you so you might turn it against me as a weapon, Headmaster,” he said, and he snarled as he said it.

Dumbledore raised a hand, looking apologetic, but smug, if one were looking for it, in the relaxed lines about his eyes. “I am well aware of that, Severus. I am sorry.” He paused for a moment, then said, “Was there anything else that you wished to speak about concerning Harry? You know my intentions now. I would still like to find some way to reconcile him to his blood family, but I acknowledge that the methods I was using did not work, and that it will take some time to find the ones that will.”

“No, Headmaster.” Snape stood up, keeping his face carefully lowered. It would not do for Dumbledore to see defiance in the crook of his neck or the tilt of his head now, not when he had done so well. “You know my own intentions. And I—can admit that yours might have their place.”

*If the world were entirely different. If Harry’s family were not the nest of vipers they are.*

“Good, Severus.” Dumbledore smiled at him. “I do hope that you will come back and see me again at some point, as I look forward to speaking with you and do miss you when we have long times in between our chats.”

*How was I to chat with you these past few months, when I was in prison?* Snape thought, but said, “Goodbye, Albus.” Then he scowled, as though long habit had made the name slip out when he didn’t intend it to.
He felt Dumbledore’s intense delight as he left. Of course the Headmaster would be delighted. Snape had apparently played into his hands. He had fulfilled his expectations perfectly, and Dumbledore trusted too much to himself to think his expectations were false. Look at how badly his expectations had failed him in the affair with Harry, and yet he thought that Harry and his parents might reconcile even now.

Snape waited until he was in the dungeons, where he knew that certain subtle spells woven into the stone somewhat discouraged the Headmaster’s wards. Then he drew the glass bottle from his pocket, and tilted it to catch the light. The silvery liquid of the Pensieve Potion shimmered with captured memories. If Snape had guided the conversation aright, and he thought he had, then those would be Dumbledore’s memories of Harry’s training. Snape knew he had often visited Godric’s Hollow when the Potter boys were children.

*Or when Connor was a child and Harry a young adult.*

*I do not yet know what I will do with these. I will be patient. But I know they will come in useful.*

*Check and mate, Albus. You should be more careful when you are playing with Slytherins.*

Snape slid the bottle back into his pocket, scowling for the benefit of the wards, and strode rapidly down the hall.

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Harry would be the first to admit that he didn’t always see things straight the first time. He had mistaken Connor’s incompetence for sweet, childish naïveté for a long time. He had mistaken Sirius’s growing insanity, and then his possession by Voldemort, for changing moods in the man himself. He had believed his parents when they said that Peter was guilty, that all Slytherins were evil, that having any Dark power was the sign of evil. He didn’t have some inherent gift to discern truth from falsehood.

He had the impression now that it had taken him an unconsciably long time to figure out that something was odd about the way Draco treated him, different than it had been.

Draco often touched him. Draco had always done that, and Harry had just accepted it as something he needed to do, a habit, like the way Hermione tugged on her hair when she was thinking hard. He hadn’t thought it *meant* anything. What could it *mean*? It just happened.

Draco often seemed irritated when people interrupted him when he was talking with Harry. Draco had always done that. It was part of him, signaling a childish desire to always have his thoughts heard first and foremost. Harry had even felt honored in that he was Draco’s chosen listener. But if he had not been Draco’s chosen listener, someone else would have been.

And now...now those two things, if nothing else, had altered. Draco still did them, but he did not do them in the same way. Harry couldn’t see when the change had begun, but he noticed it now.

Draco touched him constantly: light brushes on the shoulder as he walked past, one hand swatting at his hair in the morning in a vain attempt to make it lie flat, a steering on the arm when Harry was about to bump into someone else in the crowded corridors. But now the touches were odd, soft, reverent, as if Draco didn’t believe Harry existed in the same world that he did. Harry supposed that he could have excused that as a relic of his habit of fooling Draco with illusions—of course his friend would want to make sure he was solid—if not for the other thing.

Draco tilted his head and gave other people this *look*, now, when they wanted to speak with Harry. It considered them, judged them, and, most of the time, discarded them. Draco stepped aside without protest if he thought their presence important, but most of the time, he simply hovered, waiting impatiently for them to be gone so that he could claim Harry’s attention again.

And now there was *this* thing.

Harry frowned at the glass serpent, which he had found in his trunk while he searched for a series of notes he’d taken on Dark creatures last year, to see if they would be any good in helping with the unicorns’ web. It still shone blue, and while purple churned around the edges, indicating that Draco felt protective of him, the blue was predominant.

So far as Harry could remember, blue was not a color described in the spell that he had chosen to make Draco’s bottle, and
which Draco had imitated when making the glass serpent.

Harry shook his head and stood. They had no Divination, since Trelawney claimed to be sick today, and Draco was still in Ancient Runes. This might be one of the few times that Harry would ever have to sneak away to the library and research the blue color in peace.

_Besides, I might as well look up unicorns while I’m there._

******

Harry settled the enormous tome, _Colors of the Soul: A Look at Common Methods of Aura-Reading_, carefully on the edge of the table. Madam Pince had stared hard enough at him when he carried the book off the shelf. He didn’t want to drop it and prompt the fierce witch to drive him out of her library.

He flipped through the book, carefully skimming each page, looking for a mention of the spell he had used on the bottle. Other passages briefly caught his eye, but none of them seemed all that relevant.

…_pale frost-blue is often believed to be an indication that somewhere a beloved is pining for his lover_…

…_Deep green as the color of a soul has several significant readings. One is that of a rich life about to come into its summer of plenty, as the hue is believed to reflect summer leaves. Another insists that the soul thus marked has a tendency to darkness, as that shade of green is of all of them closest to black_…

…_It was once believed that Seers saw souls in colors, but this is now generally believed not to be the case_…

At last, Harry found the description of the spell, and shook his head when he saw it. The list of colors was considerably longer than the one he’d seen when reading a description of the spell the first time. Of course, the books in Diagon Alley wouldn’t have had enough information. He settled down to read, resigned to looking for a time, since the list was enormous and split into subtle shadings, such as _deep red-gold_ and _pale lime-green_.

To his shock, there was only one entry for blue in the whole of the list. The description after it made him fall deeper into shock.

*Blue. Deep love; devotion.*

Harry felt his throat dry out. His eyes stung with something that might or might not have been the beginning of tears. He settled the book from its slant into a flat position, a movement that didn’t even make the table tremble but caused Madam Pince to scowl at him anyway, and then leaned forward. He felt disconnected from his body, and his arms shook with fine tremors.

*I—*

*That’s impossible.*

Harry would have thought that it indicated the love of friendship, which Draco had already told him he felt several times, but there were other entries on the list for friendship, mostly under various shades of green.

Blue indicated romantic love.

*But Draco can’t love me like that, Harry thought, and raked a hand through his hair. It wouldn’t make sense. I—people love each other in different ways, but they have to have a reason to fall in love with someone, even if they can’t articulate them. You don’t go around falling in love with every random person you meet. And Draco has absolutely no reason in the world to fall in love with me.*

Harry could see why someone would love _Draco_; that was no problem. He was capable of fierce loyalty. His occasional fits of childishness were endearing once Harry got used to them. He could admit his mistakes, as he had after summoning Julia. He did things to change himself without bragging about it, like trying to learn pureblood rituals. He shone joy when he was happy, shone rage when he was angry, and in general acted like a living window on a marvelous land. Most people did, in Harry’s experience—what he had said to Vera about finding most people wonderful was true—but Draco’s soul-land was
particularly vivid to Harry.

Harry could not imagine Draco giving that emotion to him, particularly because he had said, and Harry had understood too late, that he believed there was one perfect person for each witch or wizard. Harry was manifestly not perfect for Draco. He was manifestly not perfect for anybody. He grieved to think that Draco had trapped himself into thinking that he was, and wondered if he had done anything, in his ignorance, to encourage it.

*He wants to love me in a moonlight sense.*

Harry had learned little about pureblood marriage and joining rituals as a child, since that was not the kind of alliance he would ever make—he couldn’t marry or join with someone, he wouldn’t have enough time to do that and live for Connor—and not the kind of alliance his parents would ever have forced Connor into. He had read about the seven types of romantic love that ancient pureblood witches and wizards believed to exist, however, if only because they were mentioned constantly, and were one of the few beliefs that crossed the divide between Light and Dark.

There was shadow love, where one partner took care of the other. There was darkness love, where both partners were locked together in a self-destructive dance that usually ended with one or both of them dying—the great passions such as tragedies were built on. There was starlight love, where the love grew from the desire to make each other’s lives easier and then traveled along in a cloudy mixture of light and darkness for all the lovers’ lives long. Most arranged marriages and joinings aimed at producing starlight.

There was lightning love, where the emotion flared quickly and usually ended in elopements and whirlwind courtships, but then faded out and might leave the pair unhappily chained to each other for the rest of their lives. There was firelight love, which surged from friendship into warmth and slow, ordinary surrender to feelings, never achieving the heights of emotion that lightning or darkness love might, but also never going out or dying.

There was moonlight love—the perfect, pure, blissful kind of love that simply erupted one day and grew stronger all the time, shining forever, always there even when the moments seemed darkest, as the moon was there even when she waned.

That was the love that Draco wanted, and it was the kind of love that Harry did not truly accept. If a marriage or joining broke apart, that did not mean it was imperfect. The partners might find happiness elsewhere. They might be perfectly happy alone. They might marry or join again, and still make a mistake. Harry refused to believe that, of all the variety of souls he had seen already, the only possible choices for each of them were perfection or unhappiness.

And then there was sunlight love.

Harry picked up *Colors of the Soul* and carried it back to its place on the shelf, unmindful of Madam Pince’s glare now. He walked down that aisle and up another until he found the book he was looking for, *Light Lady and Dark Lord*, and took it down. He had read part of this the other day to reassure himself that the Light Lady Adalrico’s ancestor had fallen in love with and forged the knife for really could have been none other than Calypso McGonagall. She had destroyed the Eagle Lord, and yes, a Bulstrode had fought next to him. It was no wonder that Lady McGonagall had refused to accept his suit.

It wasn’t that part of the story Harry was interested in now, though. He flipped until almost the end, to a passage he had read as a child, and bent over it.

*Calypso McGonagall had put her power into her voice, and it was her voice that destroyed the Eagle Lord at last. She drew her enemies into one place, one battlefield in the north of Scotland. When they were gathered into that place, all those Dark witches and wizards, she drove her voice downward, into the earth, singing.*

*And it answered her, with the Deepest of All Songs, and destroyed the Eagle Lord and his followers in a quake that harmed no one else.*

*The Lady went to walk the battlefield afterwards, with a Seer close beside her. She wished to see if anything lived in any of her wounded enemies’ souls that could be salvaged.*

Harry had not understood that part as a child, not seeing why Lady McGonagall would want to have a prophetess with her, but now he comprehended. This would have been a Seer like Vera, capable of telling whether someone was worth the effort to redeem.
Among the wounded and half-destroyed, they came upon Achernar Black. Now, this witch was the greatest of the Eagle Lord’s followers—not the most powerful, but the most feared, his great torturer and his second-in-command. Her own power was also in her voice. She needed no whips, no Unforgivable Curses, to break someone else. She need only speak to them, and that person would be screaming before the end. She was badly hurt when they found her, but alive.

The Lady of Light looked upon her Seer, and she waited.

“She might be saved, still,” said the Seer, after reading Achernar Black’s soul.

Calypso McGonagall waited to hear no more. She picked up the wounded witch in her arms and took her herself from the battlefield, nursed her back to health, and kept her in her own house, striving to rekindle that elusive spark of light and kindness and humanity that the Seer had seen in the midst of all her great darkness.

It took seven years before Achernar would stop attempting to escape or kill herself, and as for what she and the Lady spoke about in their private conversations, no one will ever know. However, it is certain that the two witches joined ten years to the day after the battle against the Eagle Lord, and through the finding of a girl who became Lady Calypso’s magical heir, and thus heir to the McGonagall line, their joining became a marriage.

They are the prime example of sunlight love, the love that is equal and fierce and burning always, the love of two so joined that they seem as one brilliant star. All these components are important, or it is not sunlight love. Equal: that the lovers might never know unconquerable uncertainty in each other, even in moments of weakness. Fierce: that it might never yield or stop burning. Burning: that it sheds light and heat upon all comers.

The world is richer for sunlight love, and whether it burns between two of Light or two of Dark or one of each, it is valued wherever it shines.

Harry put down the book and closed his eyes. That is the kind of love I would want to have, could I dream of such a thing as attracting someone else. That’s the kind of love I would want for Draco, did he not so obviously want something different. He’s deceived himself in me. There is nothing I can offer him, not like he deserves, and not if he wants moonlight love—or any other kind, for that matter.

So I have to tell him that. I know that he’s going to hurt because of it, and so will I, but I can’t lie to him like this. However he’s convinced himself that I’m perfect for him, whatever mask of me he’s seeing, he has to be unconvinced.

Harry gently put Light Lady and Dark Lord back into its place, and then strode from the library towards the Ancient Runes classroom.

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Chapter Forty-Three: They Are Dancing

Draco sighed as he finished the last rune drawing. He did enjoy this class, but sometimes the tiny, endless, complicated variations on the runes made him want to scream. And they wouldn’t even create some kind of amusing effect if you got them wrong, either. They just wouldn’t work, and you wouldn’t know it until you tried to use them.

Draco wondered why anyone would want to use them in battle, though he supposed their main use was outside battle situations. And yet there were those stories of rune-trained war witches and wizards…

He shook his head and tucked his thoughts back where they belonged, the same way he was slipping his book into his schoolbag. There was a time for thinking about class, and that was when he did homework or was actually in the classroom. Otherwise, he wanted to think about other things.

His mind returned at once to its favorite subject, of course. Harry.

Draco smiled slightly as he threaded between the desks and the other leaving students, heading for the door. He knew it was slow, that it would probably always be slow, but he and Harry were making progress. Harry had told him about Moody, and they watched the Defense professor together, though he made no more spectacular mistakes like trying to put Harry under Imperius. Harry didn’t go provokingly out of his way to talk to other people just because Draco didn’t like it. Harry noticed when something was wrong with him and asked about it.
Things weren’t as perfect as Draco would like them to be, but they were not as stupid as they had been when Harry wouldn’t talk about his mother, either.

And then, of course, Draco stepped out of the Ancient Runes classroom and found Harry leaning against the wall, waiting for him with a grave expression on his face.

“Why are you here?” Draco’s mind sprang into motion, trying to find some explanation that didn’t involve disaster for one or both of them. “Did you get hurt?”

Harry blinked, as though he thought it strange that that should be the first thing on Draco’s mind, and shook his head. “Divination was canceled,” he explained. “But I found something, and I wanted to tell you about it.”

Draco let his shoulders fall, causing his bag to slip, and him to grab for it. Harry darted forward and steadied it with one hand. Draco glanced up at him. He felt his stomach tighten when he saw the gentle look in the green eyes, as though Harry were only waiting to break bad news.

“You did get hurt,” he breathed.

Harry touched his shoulder, a motion so slight and swift that Draco barely felt it. He knew it had happened, though. He wasn’t about to deceive himself when Harry made the rare motion to touch him first. “No,” he said. “But I’m afraid that you may be about to. I need to speak with you in private, Draco.”

Still not sure what this could be about, Draco nodded slowly. “No one should be in the further corners of the library at this time of the afternoon.”

Harry sighed. “I’m afraid that won’t do. Some room really private, Draco.”

“Why?”

“You might…yell.”

Draco linked the gentle look in Harry’s eyes together with his behavior then. The idiot was about to make some other sacrifice. He would be convinced that it was for Draco’s own good, of course, whatever it was. Probably he meant to end their friendship, or to back out on sharing things with Draco.

A heat shimmer of anger made its way up his spine. “There’s a classroom on the second floor that’s rarely opened,” he said coolly. “Let’s use that one.”

Harry blinked, but looked just as happy not to have to climb staircases until they reached one of the classrooms on the seventh floor. “Let’s,” he said, and walked beside Draco as they turned down the hall. All the while, he looked at him out of the corner of his eye. His face was downcast but determined, and now and then he chewed on his lip.

Oh, yes. It’s another sacrifice.

Draco could feel his anger baking his heart until it was hard as a coal. He did care about Harry, of course he did, but even a caring friend could get tired of these fits of his. And if what Harry wanted to take away from him was something that Draco also wanted, then he was prepared to fight for it. The gentle stubbornness Harry looked ready to exert was not going to be enough this time.

If he can’t be selfish, I’m perfectly capable of it.

Draco extended his emotional senses. He’d been trying to keep them to himself in the past week, learning to drop the crutch of Harry’s feelings and walk among other people, sensing only what he wanted to sense. The boy he loved was still the easiest target, however. He felt the slick stone of determination, smelled the honeysuckle scent of concern for him, and saw a brief flash of pink light that usually indicated Harry was about to do something “good” that he nevertheless didn’t want to do.

Draco nodded briskly. He was only confirming his guess, and he had nearly convinced himself that whatever he wanted and would fight for would be what Harry wanted and was willing to fight for, too.
I’m not about to abandon him in any sense. He’d better not ask me to.

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They reached the classroom, and Draco entered with a cautious look around. Moody did sometimes use this room to show physical demonstrations to his students that the ordinary room wasn’t large enough to accommodate, but now it was empty. Harry ducked in, and Draco locked the door.

*He’ll probably try to bolt the moment he realizes how serious I am.*

Harry turned to face him, his eyes wide and his face open. Draco held firm against it. It was a beautiful, coaxing expression, and it was manipulative. Harry had frequently used it to urge Millicent and Pansy out of bad moods.

“Draco,” Harry said, “I saw a new shade, blue, in that glass serpent you gave me. I went to the library to look it up, and realized that it meant romantic love. I know that you love me, now.” He took a deep breath.

Draco stared at him, his own shock sweeping away the emotional sensations coming from Harry. This was not the way he had envisioned Harry finding out. He had plans for what would happen when he finally told Harry, or, as seemed more and more likely, someone in Slytherin let it slip to him. He had never thought of this.

Then he took in Harry’s expression again, and felt the irritation and anger turn to rage, hard and deep.

“And you’ve come to tell me that you can’t return that love,” he interrupted. It was not the end of what he wanted to say—he could anticipate Harry’s answer, in fact—but it was a necessary step in the conversation.

Harry shook his head, eyes widening even further. He could make a killing in politics if he could just use that expression to mean other things, Draco thought cynically. “It’s not that, Draco. If I could afford to love someone else, then I would love you. How could I not? You’re the person I feel I know best, the one person who’s managed to really correct your mistakes when it comes to me, and force me to correct mine, too.” A brief smile blazed across his face like a falling star, and vanished again. “You’ve been my friend since we came to Hogwarts, and you went through trials that would destroy any ordinary person, and you’re still right here. But I know that you must have fallen in love with some imperfect part of me, a part that you’re convinced is perfect. So I came to tell you that I’m not really just that part of me. I know that you’ll hurt for a while, but it would be immoral of me to keep on lying, just because I want to enjoy you love and your attention.” He paused and looked at Draco attentively.

Draco was past rage, and into sheerest astonishment, not that far from amusement. Of course Harry was reacting like this. The really funny thing was that Harry thought Draco would go along with it.

He laughed.

Harry blinked, then bit his lip and looked thoughtfully at him. “Was I wrong?” he asked. “Did the blue color really mean you love someone else?”

*Oh, no, he doesn’t.* Draco took a few steps forward and grabbed Harry’s hand tightly. It must have hurt, but Harry didn’t wince or pull back. He just stood there, patiently waiting for Draco to explain things to him. He would not think there was anything wrong with what he’d said, of course.

“I’ve gone through a lot, you said,” Draco muttered to him. “Trials that would have destroyed any ordinary person.”

“I did mean that.” Harry narrowed his eyes, his own temper obviously stung. “I’ll repeat it as often as you want me to. I don’t say things I don’t mean—not to you.”

Draco felt a rising sweetness threaten to distract his attention from the matter at hand, but he pushed it aside. He had a lot to make clear to Harry in the next little while. “I know you meant that,” he murmured, leaning closer. Harry just stared straight at him, refusing to back down or be intimidated. That was one of the things Draco loved about him, and he let that shine in his eyes even as he glared. “What you don’t understand, Harry, is that I’m not in love with some imperfect part of you. I’ve seen what you really are, all the irritating parts included, and that’s the person I love.”
“You can’t,” said Harry. “You stand condemned out of your own mouth.”

Oh, yes, just try and play lawyer, Harry. You’ve never been good at it. Draco raised his eyebrows in polite question.

“You came to me and had a conversation with me, just before Christmas, about perfection,” said Harry, lifting his chin. “You said that you felt there was only one witch or wizard out there for every other wizard or witch. That they could be perfect for each other. We disagreed, remember? I don’t believe in that kind of perfection, Draco. But if you love me, and if that’s what you think you’ve found in me, it’s an obvious mismatch between what you want and who I really am. I don’t believe in your ideal of perfection, and your perfect witch or wizard would have to do so.”

Draco found himself closer to the edge of anger than he would have liked. Merlin, Harry, you manage to shove me around more effectively than anyone else ever has. He caught his breath before he could blurt out something hurtful.

“I was expressing an ideal, Harry,” said Draco. “That’s all. I’m not surprised that you took me the wrong way. I barely knew what I was saying myself, caught as I was between trying to state what I felt for you and keep you from guessing that it was you I felt it for. But suffice it to say that I can live with someone who doesn’t accept just the same beliefs that I do. Very easily. I’ve done it for four years, haven’t I?”

“Three and a half,” Harry corrected.

“I’m not going to let your pedantry ruin this,” said Draco. “I’m not going to let anything ruin this.” He was walking a fine line. He really would have liked to yell at Harry about being stupid, or kiss him, or do something else that would dispense with the need for all this careful talking. But Harry would find it a lot easier to ignore those things. These words would go to the heart of him. “If you tell me to go away, then yes, of course I will. But everything else is just a remnant of those idiocies you’ve been told. I’ll keep my promise not to hurt Harry’s mother. I won’t even mention her. “You said you would consider me if you could afford to love someone else. What did you mean by that? Why can’t you afford to?”

Harry tugged on his arm, trying to back away. Draco wouldn’t let him go. Harry hissed at him, and still Draco kept him close. He’d noticed that Harry liked to withdraw into himself when he discussed anything that touched on his training. A physical hold made it harder for that to happen, and the one thing Draco absolutely did not want to happen now was for Harry to find his own logic and start fighting back against Draco on equal ground.

Plenty of time for us both to be equal later. Not now. And if that makes me a sneaky, good-for-nothing Slytherin, so be it. I wasn’t fair when Harry had just woken from that dream, either.

“You know the answer,” Harry said at last, seeming to decide that he would settle for meeting Draco eye to eye if he couldn’t back away. I’m not scared, his face proclaimed, while the way his hand shook betrayed otherwise. “I’m going to die in this War, Draco. It’s almost certain. And if I survive, I’m not going to have any time for a lover. I’ll have too much to do, for the other magical creatures and for the surviving wizards. It wouldn’t be fair to you, either, to demand that you become some sort of war spouse who only waits at home for your husband to come back to you. I won’t ask that of you. I would never ask it of anyone, but especially of you. You’re as free as anyone else. You should have the right to choose your own life.”

Pretty, Draco had to admit. I think there are a whole lot of people who would be convinced by that—either in thinking that they should choose someone else, or thinking that that meant Harry was just cold and didn’t want any kind of companionship.

Too bad for them. I know him better.

“I’m never going to wait at home, Harry,” he said. “I am going into the battles right alongside you so that I can fight at your side, and the politics so that I can plot with you, and whatever other arena you enter. I love you. I love everything that’s in you. Nothing about you is strange to me, and no part of your life is going to be strange to me, either. I know that we’re never going to be identical, and I’ve seen that since I summoned Julia Malfoy, but we can be equal.” He paused for a moment, then shrugged. I’ve said other things that could sound stupid if Harry took them that way. I might as well say this. “I want sunlight love with you, if you’re familiar with that term.”

Harry’s face washed of color. Then he said, “But you want moonlight love.”

Draco blinked at him. He thought he’d done well so far, but he just couldn’t keep up with Harry, the way he rushed up to the edge of a cliff made of logic, jumped off it, and landed on the far side of a different ravine altogether. “Why do you think
“All that nattering about perfection.” Harry had his eyes narrowed, as though he were examining a fly someone had dropped in his glass of pumpkin juice. Draco felt a surge of hope. You had everything planned out, didn’t you, Harry? And then I rearranged it. “It’s moonlight love that’s called perfect. Sunlight love burns people, sometimes. It’s too fierce. If you want someone perfect, then you want love like the moon.”

“No,” said Draco slowly. He could understand the confusion, but he didn’t understand the pallor of Harry’s face when he spoke of it. “I’m quite sure. I want love like the sun. I think everyone does, of course, unless they’re mad and want the darkness, but most people have to settle for what they get. I’m not settling. I’ve got you, until the moment when you utterly tell me to go away.” He clasped Harry’s other hand while he was distracted.

“This isn’t—” said Harry, and then stopped. He tugged against Draco’s grip. Draco ignored the motion. Harry looked away from him for the first time, staring down at his own hands. “You want sunlight love,” he said, his voice suddenly clipped. “That’s fine. That’s perfect. I hope you find it. But you’re not going to find it with me.”

Draco gritted his teeth. He felt sick to his stomach, but he also remembered all the idiocies that Harry believed about himself. This was probably directly traceable to another of those idiocies. “Why is that? Do you not want it yourself?”

“I want it myself,” Harry said. “But it’s a stupid dream. A child’s dream, like you said. Most people have to settle for what they get. And I’ve got something else. I’ve got a duty that won’t go away, and if I let myself start thinking that I’ll get a spouse or a lover, it’ll disrupt things. I was made to help other people, Draco. I stay in the background, and I make them happier. That’s what I’m supposed to do.” This time, he pulled violently enough that Draco was forced to lose his left hand.

It was still going much more positively than Draco had expected it to go at this point, though. For one thing, Harry could have used his magic at any time to break free, or pin Draco to the wall, or make him shut up, and it hadn’t even occurred to him. He was vibrating with distress, but he hadn’t called his power.

For another, Draco knew the enemy, now, and he could attack it with every weapon at his command.

“That’s stupid, Harry,” he said, keeping his voice low and compelling. “Why should everyone else have a lover, and you don’t get one? What’s the big exception about you?” He cocked his head. “You’re the one who’s said before that other people are far better than you are, that you weren’t anything special.” That statement had always made Draco want to laugh himself sick, but he knew it was what Harry himself believed.

“That’s the thing about me,” Harry said. He was trying to put the shattered pieces of his mask back in place, and failing. “They’re better than I am, Draco. Everyone is wonderful. You deserve someone who can make you happy, who can love you the way you want. And I’m not going to be that person.”

“It’s not that you’re not that person by nature, Harry,” said Draco. “It’s not even that you don’t want to be that person. What is it?”

“It isn’t—” Harry swallowed. “There’s not—” He stopped, looking utterly lost.

Draco understood. Harry saw where this road led as clearly as he did. If Harry admitted that one fundamental truth like this about himself was a lie, he would have to admit others were. The house of cards would start coming down, even if it took years for it to fall completely. Harry wouldn’t be able to hide any more behind stupid, illogical assurances like everyone else being a better person than he was. He would have to give in and admit that he was just fine in some ways, and good in others, and engage with people as a wizard and not some distant, aloof benefactor.

It was frightening, Draco supposed, and that was why Harry was currently fighting the realization with all his might. And the method he chose would have worked, with someone else who knew him less well than Draco did.

“I’ve done horrible things, Draco. You know that. I summoned Dark magic. I haven’t cared enough. I’ve made so many mistakes. I knocked you out and left you behind last year when you wanted to go with me. I valued Connor over you until the end of last year, and I know that always irritated you.” Harry turned wide eyes on him once again. “Don’t you see? Those are parts of the kind of person I am, too.”

“I know that,” said Draco. He was feeling calm, past the initial surge of emotions that had fastened him to Harry’s side in the
first place. “And what you don’t seem to understand, Harry, is that I forgive you for those. Your own credo. I know you hate its being used against you, but there you go. Sometimes we can’t choose what our friends do. Or our lovers, for that matter.”

“Don’t you understand?” Harry wrenched backwards. Draco let go of his right wrist and took his left one. “This could happen again.”

“Then I’ll get angry,” said Draco. “And then I’ll forgive you, and then we’ll be back here again. Unless you tell me to leave you alone, Harry, that you don’t want to love me in that particular way. I’ll leave you alone, then. But you have to tell me first. Your attempts to frighten me away don’t frighten me in the least.”

Harry glared at him helplessly. Draco rearranged his face in his best helpful expression.

“Damn you, this isn’t funny,” Harry hissed at him.

“I know,” said Draco. “I never said it was.”

“It’s—you can’t love me like that,” said Harry.

“Why?” Draco asked. “Is this your telling me to go away?” He braced himself. He would hate it, it would hurt, but he honestly felt as though he would have jumped off a cliff at that moment if Harry told him to.

“No,” said Harry. “It’s impossible like you flying without magic is impossible. You can’t. If you could really see my soul, then you wouldn’t love me. You’re still seeing a bit of me, and convincing yourself that I can be good based on that. But that part isn’t me, Draco.” He looked a bit calmer now that he was twisting logic back into tortured shapes, Draco thought. “I’m not what you think I am.”

“How do you know that?” Draco asked. “You’re not in my head, sharing my judgment.”

“Because I know myself,” said Harry, and smiled slightly. “And if you love me, then you must not know the truth. One implies the other.” He looked half-relaxed.

“You’ve looked into my mind, and seen what I feel.” Draco could keep himself going in the face of this. He could. Breaking down into a tantrum would feel good, but it would not help, and Draco was past the point when he flew into anger or tears just because it felt good. “Can you think me mistaken, after that, Harry?”

“You could believe that I really am as you see me. That doesn’t mean it’s the truth.”

_Fight poison with poison, then._ “And how do you know that your own view of yourself is correct? Unless you’re suddenly manifesting magical talents that you haven’t bothered to share with me, you can’t see your own soul, either.”

Harry’s smile withered. Draco lifted his head. _I thought so. He isn’t back in his secure view of himself, yet. I can still take his wobbly tower down with a statement as simple as this one._

“Because I know,” said Harry, his voice growing tight. “Because I’ve been told that all my life—“ He stopped.

Draco rubbed his hand gently, making the motion a contrast to his harsh words. “Because your mother told you, isn’t that right, Harry? Your mother whom you know lied to you and abused you?”

“Stop it.” Harry lunged around him for the first time, heading for the door. Draco spun, but kept his feet anchored, holding Harry still.

“No,” he said. “I won’t. I promised that I wouldn’t hurt her or insult her, but I never said I wouldn’t speak the truth, Harry. And I certainly never promised that I wouldn’t insult you. The truth is that you’re being a coward. You’re so scared of what it means if you’re better than you think you are that you want to run away from me.”

Harry turned back around. A soundless scream was issuing from his mouth, and he panted with tears in his eyes. He shook his head madly as he backed up from Draco. “No,” he whispered. “This isn’t—it can’t be what you want it to be. Because it isn’t. And I know it doesn’t make sense, and I know that you’ll say that, and I don’t care, because that’s the way it is.”
Draco took a deep breath. He wanted badly to let Harry go, let him regroup. They would have the rest of their lives to work these things out. On the other hand, let him go now, and he didn’t know if he would get this far again. Harry was going to build his walls high and strong, and come up with more logical arguments to distract Draco’s attention from the illogicalities sitting right in the middle of him. And in another mood, Draco didn’t think he could be as generous and forgiving as he was right now.

*Or maybe you’re just scared of living with Harry when he knows that you love him.*

Draco acknowledged that, and put the thought away, because it wasn’t useful right now.

“Listen, Harry,” he whispered. “Is there anyone whose judgment you would trust to be unbiased, someone who could see your soul and tell you the truth about it?”

“The Seer,” Harry muttered. “Vera. The one you met the night you summoned Julia. But she’s back in her Sanctuary now. There’s no one near me whose judgment I would—”

Abruptly, he froze. Then he said, “You wouldn’t really make me go to them, Draco, would you?”

“Go to whom?” Yes, I will. I’m sorry, Harry, but even if you don’t choose me after all, I want you to have this. Vera might have made you look at your soul, but then she went away again. This has to be a gaze you can’t back away from.

“The unicorns,” Harry breathed. “They can recognize innocence. They can recognize goodness. I think I know how to break their web now.” He turned those wide, appealing eyes on Draco one final time. “But that wouldn’t be right, would it? Because I would have a selfish purpose in breaking the web, and that wouldn’t be in accord with what a true *vates* should do. So we could wait—”

“And then you would have an even more selfish purpose in waiting,” Draco cut in. “Besides, Harry, you told me that a true *vates* is supposed to know himself inside and out, and shouldn’t that include whatever truth the unicorns can tell you?”

Harry closed his eyes. His expression was of someone who knows that he can’t stop the boulder already falling.

“All right,” he whispered. “Yes. I—we’ll go to them.”

Draco nodded. “Right now.”

Harry opened his mouth, but obviously saw it would do no good. He gave a tiny nod.

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Harry was shaking as he walked along the path into the Forbidden Forest, ducking beneath branches slick and starred with ice-flowers. It wasn’t from the cold, nor yet from the tight grip that Draco had on his wrist, the grip he hadn’t once released, though that felt too good. It wasn’t even from the thought of facing the unicorns.

It was from the thought of facing what came after the unicorns were free, of not being able to hide any more.

A hoof sounded off to the side. Harry knew it was the centaurs watching them, and kept his eyes focused dead ahead.

One way or another, he was going to have to go forward from this. This was a crossroads, and someone had shut the gates behind him.

Harry darted a glance at Draco. *No, not some mysterious someone. I know his name perfectly well.*

A glimpse of white showed through the trees to one side—a falling snowflake.

He was not going to be able to change what happened.

A convulsive shiver gripped him, and Harry held himself with his free arm.

Bells rang through the Forest.
Startled, Harry jerked to a stop, and felt oddly naked for a moment. The last time he’d been in the Forest, the Many snake had ridden his arm, and he’d been able to use that to distract Tybalt and John. Since December, however, the Many snakes had been all together in their den, tending the eggs about to hatch, and Harry had nothing but his own magic and the courage of his convictions, which felt like very far from being enough.

The bells rang again, and a unicorn stallion walked onto the path.

Harry watched him come, his coat catching the quick winter light in mirror-colored shimmers. His golden hooves rose and fell in odd motions that didn’t seem to echo the chiming sound of them. His head bobbed, his neck rolled, and his ears twitched in motions that mimicked a deer’s more than a horse’s, but all of the motions only seemed to rush into light that rippled towards that silver horn.

Unicorns are creatures of clear sight—honesty, Light. He knows what I’ve come for.

Harry put out one hand. The unicorn came to him, but halted just shy of a touch, his head lowered and his horn pointed towards Harry’s left shoulder.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he could see the blazing web that crawled over the unicorn and crept into the Forest to encircle the others. He knew, from hints he’d read in the books during his research on unicorns, that Dobby had been right in what he said about that web. Ancient wizards had bound the unicorns because they were too beautiful.

But they had also bound them because they were beautiful. They wanted unicorns always nearby to look at. They could not bear the thought of them dispersing, the way they would, naturally, and living one or two at a time, apart from each other, in places that they would hallow. They could not bear the thought of going a lifetime without seeing one, or only catching a glimpse of a white shape darting through a clearing, and a distant, muffled sound of bells.

But that distant, hurried glimpse by sunlight or moonlight was what should have happened, and what the unicorns wanted to happen, and it was what Harry was finally ready to give them.

He forced himself to ignore his own motivation, and Draco standing motionless, rigid with wonder, at his side. He reached out, and dipped under the web, and found the weak spot in the center of it.

Wizards were complacent now, knowing exactly where unicorns lived and what had to be done to keep them that way. They might come and stare a few times in their lives, but then they would go away again. Those ancient wizards had been desperate for a glimpse of beauty, and their desire had kept the web strong. As desire faded, the strands in the center of the net were also unraveling.

Harry now had to conquer, mainly, his own desire to keep that beauty snared and near.

And it was harder than he had expected. He pictured never seeing a unicorn again in his life, and though he had seen them only a few times, and once had been to watch Quirrell kill one, he struggled. It was like being asked to yield one of the colors he had always known. What would his world be like if he could suddenly no longer see silver, or white, or gold? The others would still be there, but they could not take the place of the one he had lost.

The unicorn stallion made no motion to help him one way or the other. He stood watching, waiting. A subtle shine permeated his coat.

Harry closed his eyes more tightly, and found the answer in his own habit of sacrifice and what the unicorns would want. He could give up this one thing he liked. He had given up things that meant more.

And the unicorns…

Harry pictured them as free, which they would be when he was done with them, and then he was crying, tears streaking his face, and then he reached out and took hold of the web, and it parted like dead skin in his hands. Someone had finally, finally, wanted the unicorns to feel pleasure more than he wanted to feel it himself, and that had been all it took. Harry mourned, that the unicorns had been enslaved for so long for so simple a reason.
Then the mourning vanished.

Harry opened his eyes.

And, for the first time, he looked straight into the heart of Light, and he understood, in that flash, why his mother and Dumbledore both loved it so much.

The unicorn shone against his surroundings, beauty of the kind that was higher and brighter and richer than what was around him, beauty that did not make the bracken and the withered leaves and the ice seem worthless, but transfigured it and lent back his own light to glorify it the more. For the first time, Harry knew what color joy had.

Then his own skin began to blaze.

Startled, Harry looked down at himself. His skin had turned transparent, and he could see a deep, clear green light welling from his arms and his wrists. It spread, pulsing, down his body, and then acquired a tinge of gold. Gold-green, the color of leaves in sunlight, the colors that Harry knew meant, together, a soul on the edge of both darkness and light, but also one that was entering into the summer of its being, and had a summer to offer others.

That hid inside him. If it was not the color of his soul, it was, at the very least, a color of who he was.

The realization chopped the legs out from under him. Harry sank into the snow of the path, and the green-golden light came with him, beaming, growing brighter now, soaring out of him, bringing a radiance to the Forest that made it look as if it were bathed in a burning spring. Harry felt Draco kneel down beside him and embrace him. He tried to speak, but he couldn’t. His throat was tight with sorrow and elation keen enough to kill him. He couldn’t hear what Draco was saying; the world was one madly thrumming mess, thanks to his heart going in his ears.

That could not cover the sound of his thoughts, though, and they repeated one thing over and over. My mother was wrong. Oh, she was wrong.

And out of the trees came the other unicorns, their legs bending like reeds, their necks bobbing like swans courting, every step light enough to be a dance. They gathered, and then they began to gallop, an enormous, turning circle around Harry and Draco, each one blazing like a stained-glass window with the sun shining through it, gratified and fulfilled and exalted.

Harry felt the lump in his throat dissolve, and he cried again, hard as he tried to resist the tears. The barriers were broken, and he had come out of the autumn and winter into summer and spring.

The circle began to blur, gaining speed. The unicorns trailed clouds of glory now, streaks of blue and red and gold and green as well as the more usual white and silver. The path and the Forest filled with the radiance of a hundred thousand dawns, rising straight up into the sky, like an aurora.

With the light went the unicorns, whirling ascending, not distinct shapes but winds of light now, the smaller shapes the foals, the larger shapes the mares and stallions, rippling through an endless spectrum of shades.

But Light. Always, Light.

They reached a point about a hundred feet into the air, and then they trembled. For a moment, the whole vision froze. Harry could hear Draco gasping beside him. He looked up, to remember this. For sure, he would never see anything like it again. The unicorns were free now.

There came a moment when he wished it could be permanent, and then he discarded that, because change was the law of life.

Then the image resounded with one musical cry, and broke apart. Burning streaks raced away towards all the edges of the horizon. The unicorns were scattering through the world now, Harry thought, and Muggles might glimpse them speeding along the streets of their cities or grazing in a back garden as easily as the wizards would see them in wild forests or galloping along the edge of the sea. Unicorns went where they pleased, and now, for the first time in centuries, they could do it again.

The silence and the dimness that fell seemed very foreign, after that, or would have, were it not for the aftertastes of light still lingering on the bracken and the ice, the leaves and the path.
Harry’s green-golden shine gently faded, though some motes flashed, lingering like last notes of music. Harry could hear his own gasping now, too. He closed his eyes tightly and strove for some sense of self-control.

“You know,” he whispered, “that it might be a long road to walk before I can love you just the way you love me.”

“I know,” Draco whispered. His voice was hoarse. “But are you going to refuse to walk that road, now?”

Harry shook his head, and then found the courage to turn, open his eyes, and look at Draco.

Draco was smiling at him. There was summer in his eyes.

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Intermission: Glances

Millicent glanced up from her book as the door to the Slytherin common room opened and Harry and Draco came through. She could barely see Harry’s face at first; Draco was bending over him and saying something in a low, excited tone that instantly made her want to listen more closely. *People always give away their best secrets when they’re talking like that.*

Harry came into view at last, and Millicent paused. She had thought of sneaking up to them so that she could hear at least a few words of Draco’s conversation—he was too deep in speech to notice her, and Harry too deep in listening—but now she gave it up.

*Something happened. At last. Draco told him? No, the shaken look in Harry’s eyes is too deep for that. He looks like he’s been picked up and dunked underwater twenty times.*

But there was a definite difference between them now, and Millicent wound up watching in silence as they climbed the stairs, her eyes narrowed in thought.

*Draco did tell him, I think. He had to have. That’s the only thing that would start that shaking in Harry. But it was combined with something else, and they probably aren’t inclined to tell me what it was.*

*Start from what you know, then. Draco told Harry. And Harry didn’t run in the other direction, or Draco would have come back to the common room alone and with his magic blasting the furniture apart in his rage.*

*This will give the Malfoys an advantage with Harry. I don’t know if Harry would actually join with Draco, but Draco isn’t one to let a door shut if it’s even a little way open.*

Millicent stood, thoughtfully, and went to write a letter to her father. She was no longer reporting to him on Harry’s daily movements, but this was something larger, something that could affect their political standing in what Adalric was calling Potter’s Alliance for want of a better name. Her father would want to know what had happened, especially since Millicent knew that he had a private bet with Lucius Malfoy about its likelihood. He would appreciate having a few days or weeks to adjust his mood to losing before Mr. Malfoy came to gloat to him about having won the bet.

******

Pansy maintained a properly solemn expression as Harry and Draco passed her, pretending that her Transfiguration homework was the most interesting thing in the world. Then she threw back her head and laughed so hard that Montague, trying to do his homework in a nearby chair, glared at her and stormed off.

*It’s about time! Honestly, I might have made a move on Harry myself if Draco had waited any longer. Since when is any Malfoy that patient, or that pigheaded?*

Pansy rolled back over and put her head on her arm, smiling. She watched Millicent go up to their room, doubtless to write a letter. She took that kind of thing seriously. She had never been more her father’s magical heir than this month, when her mother was due to deliver a child who might or might not share Millicent’s position in the family someday.

Pansy had no letters to write, at least right now. She was only her mother’s blood heir, and had no need to let her know of Harry and Draco’s obvious attachment to each other until it became more obvious.
Let them enjoy their privacy, Pansy thought as she picked her book up again, her cheeks hurting from the pressure of her grin. They’ll have little of it soon enough. Draco ought to realize that dating the Hero of Hogwarts will make him rather more interesting than he’s been so far. Watch him get indignant about it, though, and storm and fume and complain that the press no longer trembles before the word of a Malfoy.

At that she couldn’t help herself, and started laughing again.

******

Albus blinked slowly, roused from a daze he couldn’t remember entering. He was often like that, when he had lost his consciousness to the wards. He was so busy seeing and hearing around the school, and sorting information into his merely human mind, that he it took him some time to realize the import of what he had seen.

Now he did.

His face grave, he paced over to his window and cast the spell that would let him see the Forbidden Forest. It lay calm and dull under the heavy February snow, looking as it always had—until Albus raised his magic and looked at it through the eyes of a man who once might have been vates, and could see webs.

The unicorns’ web was gone, and with it, a large part of the beauty and color of the Forest.

Albus closed his eyes and sighed wearily. He wondered if Harry knew what he had done, realized how endangered the unicorns would be in the wider world, from Muggle hunters and wizards intent on getting their hands on horns. He wondered if Harry even realized that a small part of the everyday joy at Hogwarts came from the happiness that the unicorns breathed as they existed in the Forest, that it dispersed across the grounds and added cheer to the students’ moods.

Of course, he would probably only shrug and say that he values the unicorns’ freedom more.

Albus shook his head. The boy was too careless, too impatient and hasty. He could not be trusted the way that Albus, as a Light Lord, should have been able to trust another powerful wizard to realize what was sensible and not make waves in the world. But Harry was not sensible, and never had been, or they wouldn’t have had to bind his magic.

Albus turned thoughtfully back to his desk. He would keep his promise, and not interfere further with Harry in the school. But he thought there was something else he could do, bread he could cast on the water and see if it came back to him. There was no harm in writing. The one he had chosen would probably reject his letters, anyway, as he’d had a habit of doing of late.

But he could try. Much of his life, lately, seemed to consist of long and patient trying, regardless of whether or not he could see immediate results.

******

Snape glanced up from the law book he was studying. It was nearly time for double Potions with the Slytherins and Gryffindors, and he wondered, mind still half-caught up in what he was reading, what Harry would look like this morning. His face had been pale and shaken last night, but he had eluded Snape’s every attempt to confront him, and simply gone to bed.

Harry and Draco came in first, most unusually, and were so caught up in talking that they didn’t even realize he was there. Snape watched them take their seats and continue chatting.

No. Not caught up in talking. Caught up in each other.

Snape released his breath on a long hiss, surprised. Harry glanced sharply at him, then, but turned his shoulder a moment later when Draco said something in a coaxing tone. Then he laughed, and his face acquired a rare, vivid openness that Snape had seen only during this past August, when Harry had been so close to peace.

He told him. And it was not a disaster.
Snape stared at them blankly, trying to conceive how that could be. Harry, from what he knew of his relationship with Draco lately, should not have taken this so calmly. He might have accepted Draco’s friendship and confidences, but it was a long step from there to being lovers, or even boyfriends. And there was the fleeting nature of Draco’s crush, which should surely have died a swift death. Crushes did, when one was Draco’s age and of Draco’s disposition. He might be possessive, but he was also temperamental. Snape had assumed he would tire of not having Harry and move on to someone else, resuming his place as Harry’s friend easily enough.

Of course, he had always been different about Harry.

Snape nearly decided that he would retain his doubts until he saw something definitive to crush them, but then stopped that train of thought. Why could he not allow himself—that was the word hovering on the edges of his consciousness—to believe that Draco’s crush would last? Was he really preparing himself to comfort a broken-hearted Harry?

Yet he should not have his heart broken at all. It should have taken far more for him to even consent to the idea, if I know him. There would be a great deal of nonsense about not being worthy of Draco’s loving him, and how he was sure that no one could love him in that way, and how he does not have a future. And Draco does not have the patience to deal with that.

Yet it had apparently happened. And there was no rupture between the boys, but no simple friendship, either, not with the way that Harry was obviously paying attention to Draco’s hand on his shoulder, gazing at it as if he knew why it was there but were trying to assimilate the reason. He would either have tolerated the touch without notice or swatted it off before.

Snape decided that he could wait and see what happened. There were far worse courses.

And now, he thought, his gaze briefly darting to the drawer where he had locked the bottle of Pensieve Potion, while his mind spasmed in wonder and doubt, I almost think I should wait on my plan. Speak to Harry, first, before I do anything rash. Perhaps I should have Draco with me when I do, if he can soothe Harry so effectively.

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“Lucius!”

Lucius glanced up lazily from the book he was reading. He had only meant to look up the color of Potter’s soul when he got it down from the library shelf, but the theory of colors was more interesting than he remembered, and he’d ended up reading a great deal more. Deep green had meant just what he thought it did, both in strength of power and potential and in darkness of the soul. Lucius had been pleased. Either color meant good things for his family, as long as things fell out in the way Narcissa said they would.

And now she was entering the room, waving a letter covered with handwriting that looked like Draco’s, her face full of proud elation.

Lucius smiled and sat upright, reaching out to catch and kiss her free hand. “Let me guess, my dear,” he said. “Our son is now absolutely sure that Harry will be our son-in-law someday.”

His wife blinked at him, an inch from gaping. Lucius allowed himself a small—a very small—smirk. It was rare enough to get the drop on Narcissa that he had no compunctions about doing so, especially when it made her act like that.

She stood straight at once, of course, her eyes narrowing. “You intercepted the owl and read the letter before I did,” she accused him.

Lucius turned a page in his book. “No.”

“Draco wrote you another letter, in which he confided his hopes and fears, so that you knew what the next message would say.”

Lucius glanced up, admiring the defiant flash of his wife’s blue eyes. “No.”

“Then tell me how.”

“No,” said Lucius a third time, and stood himself, drawing Narcissa near and kissing her on the mouth to silence her. “Does it
matter, my dear?” he breathed as he drew back. “We will be Harry’s favored allies; we cannot help but be, as long as he
returns Draco’s love, do they join in five years or in ten. The position of our family is secure for at least this generation, and
the next as well, as long as Harry and Draco find a child to be a magical heir. Imagine the power of one who inherits the
magic of a Lord. You were the one who saw the potential in Harry first. You were the one who told me. Can you doubt that
the world will change when Harry Potter is done with it?”

“He will not be a Lord,” said Narcissa, but she had the half-comfortable, half-speculative look on her face that meant she was
thinking about what he had said, and fitting it neatly into the world of her own plans. Or she was thinking about the kiss,
Lucius conceded, as she threaded her fingers through his hair.

“No,” said Lucius, though privately, he had his doubts about that. Potter had noble ideals, of course, but every other wizard
who had tried to walk that road had ended up on one side or the other. So long as the boy chose Dark when he did stumble—
and Lucius could not help but think he would, what with his swearing not to be a Light Lord—then there was nothing wrong
with his middle road. It might even increase his prestige in the public’s eye. They would think him all the more benevolent.

“But he will be Draco’s, or so he thinks,” said Narcissa, and put the letter on the table beside his chair. “You will read it
later?” She started pulling him towards the stairs.

Lucius smiled at her, the slow smile he knew she liked best. “Of course,” he agreed, and let thoughts of politics go for now.
Marrying Narcissa had been good politics, but that was not the reason he was filled with fierce delight whenever she wanted
to go to bed. That was all, and only, her.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Four: A Moment Between Brothers

Harry sighed and shifted back until he sat on the edge of the single long table that was the only furniture in this particular
abandoned classroom; apparently Professor Flitwick’s third-year Charms class had managed to disintegrate most of their
desks, and he’d had to appropriate furniture from the upstairs classrooms. It wasn’t one of their usual meeting places, and for
that reason, Harry knew that Connor was more likely to come alone.

Good.

He had things he had to speak to Connor about, and Connor had had the same idea, from the note that Godric had delivered to
Harry during breakfast this morning. A private place would be best for both.

The door opened, and Connor entered. Harry could feel the old relaxation of soul that he had had around his brother since he
was a small child. He was most comfortable with Connor, for all that he could feel different things for other people now. He
had to step carefully with Snape, Slytherin was sometimes a mass of reaction and counter-reaction and watching, and
Draco…

Draco kept frightening Harry. He was too sharp-edged, too prone to know when Harry was doubting his ability to continue
along their path and slide in to reassure him. Harry hadn’t been able to hide from him at all since the freeing of the unicorns
nearly a week ago.

In some moments, he felt an almost giddy rejoicing about that. The rest of the time, he was terrified.

But with Connor, he only needed to think about that insofar as he had to tell him about Draco. He grinned and held out his
arms, and Connor came to him, hugged him hard, and then stepped back and drew something large out of his pocket. Harry
raised his eyebrows. It was the golden egg Connor had managed to acquire from the Hungarian Horntail in the First Task.

“This is the clue to the Second Task,” said Connor bluntly. “I have no clue what to do with it.”

Harry blinked. “Connor, the Second Task’s only two days away.”

Connor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I know. And yeah, it was stupid of me to wait this long to come to
you. But I really thought I could figure it out on my own.” He paused, then added softly, “And I don’t like thinking about the
Tournament, you know? I didn’t choose this, and even with your distracting the attention from me, everyone still expects me
to be Hogwarts’s Champion somehow.”
Harry felt a stab of guilt. He had never asked how Connor felt about his sudden presence in the First Task. He had taken the opportunity to let it slide into silence when Connor never brought it up. He had enough other things to think about that he would take quiet when it was offered.

“Do you—do you resent what I did?” he asked.

Connor stood there for some seconds, studying his trainers. Then he looked up. “Do you want the brotherly answer or the real answer?” he asked.

Harry grinned despite himself. “The brotherly answer is the one that parents would approve of, right?”

“Right. I tell you how thrilled and proud I am that you’re finally getting some attention, that of course you were right to defend everybody and without you tons of people would have died, and so on.” Connor waved a hand.

“Assume that’s a given,” said Harry. “And the real answer?”

“I was kind of jealous, yeah.” Connor shifted. “I mean, Harry, it’s wonderful that you finally are getting attention. But I was used to it for so long.” He shrugged and tried a self-deprecating laugh that didn’t come out well. “I suppose I’m not quite as resigned to being in the shadows as I thought I was. I have no idea how you stood it for so long,” he added.

Harry shrugged in turn. “I was used to it. Believe me, I would transfer all the fame and glory to you in a heartbeat. I have no idea how you stand that.”

Connor shook his head. “All right. So we’ve established that we’d like each other’s respective amounts of attention, and yeah, I’m jealous, and on we go. Can you help me with this?” He reached out and flipped open the top of the golden egg.

Harry jumped as an enormous screeching sound issued from the egg, then blinked. “That’s Mermish,” he said, after listening to it for a moment.

Connor’s mouth dropped open. “How the fuck do you know that?” he blurted. “Hermione wouldn’t have known that.”

“Did you ask her?” Harry was trying to make out individual words, but he knew very little of the language—how to count to ten and a few greetings, really. It was definitely Mermish, though. Nothing sounded similar.

“Well, um, no.”

“There you go, then.” Harry reached out and shut the top of the egg. He could just make out that the words were repeating, but that didn’t help with knowing them. “It sounds like ordinary speech underwater. Take it to the Lake or a bathtub or a pool, and listen to it there.”

Connor abruptly swallowed. “You think we’ll have to go underwater for the Second Task?”

Harry softened. “I forgot, Connor,” he said. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. I can teach you a charm that’ll let you see and hear and breathe down there.”

“That has nothing to do with water being over my head, though.” Connor’s voice had risen a notch.

Harry settled for walking over to his brother and patting him on the shoulder. “I’m sure it’ll be fine,” was all he could say.

Connor nodded, shakily.

He’d nearly drowned in the tub when they were three. Lily had left Harry to watch him while she went to fetch their clothes, but Harry hadn’t realized the tub was full of water already, and had been thinking about practicing spells. Connor had climbed up on the side to look in, slipped, and fallen. Harry had run to his side the moment he heard the splashing and gurgling, but he knew it was his duty to get his brother out of trouble, and Connor couldn’t shriek for help, and Harry wasn’t strong enough to lift him out. His magic had come into play at last, snatching Connor awkwardly from the water and holding his head out so he could breathe. Since then, his brother been all right around water he could stand or sit in, like a shower or a shallow pool or the ocean along the beach near Lux Aeterna, but he’d panicked whenever the water went over his head, and
he was not a strong swimmer.

“Can you teach me a warming charm, too?” Connor whispered. “The lake will be cold, I think.”

“Of course,” said Harry quietly, focusing on standing as still as possible so that Connor wouldn’t panic further. He was thinking of giving up on what he’d come here to tell his brother. Surely Connor needed help with the Second Task far more than he needed to hear Harry’s secrets.

“What did you want to tell me?”

Damn. He’d remembered the note Harry had sent Hedwig with, requesting a meeting, just before the note from Connor arrived at the Slytherin table. He took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of the table again. “Well, one is that—” He paused. How did he describe what he and Draco had, or didn’t have, right now in words?

“Um,” he said, and then decided to go for honesty and be damned. Connor was a Gryffindor. He’d get it. “Draco loves me.”

Connor stared at him.

“And I—“ Harry looked away. “I don’t know what my own feelings are.” Merlin, I sound like some sort of eleven-year-old crying over her dead kitten. He hated being honest, because most of the time it sounded stupid. He was amazed that Draco hadn’t got tired of it yet and let things slip back into their comfortable silence. He was gradually coming to realize that that wouldn’t happen again, though, or at least not for long stretches, and that was another thing to terrify himself with. “But he proved a point to me the other day about my wanting to run away from what he wants, and I know I’ll love him someday. Right now, I have no idea about it. I want to hide under the bed.” He flushed, since he’d not meant to admit that last part out loud.

Connor was silent for a moment. Harry looked back at him, almost glad to find a new source of anxiety in wondering what Connor would say about his dating Draco. At least it would not be as deeply painful as this attempt to live like a normal person, to remember, whenever he was tempted to slide back into his old patterns of thought, that Lily was wrong.

At last, Connor said, “Well, he’d be mad not to love you, Harry, honestly.”

Harry stared at him, and then said, because he had to get away from the seriousness somehow, “Is this the part where you confess the weird incestuous crush you’ve nursed on me for years?”

“No,” said Connor, as though talking to a small child, though he flushed a deep red first. “No. I—well, damn, Harry, I’ve seen the way he hangs all over you. I didn’t think it was a crush. I thought it was just hero-worship. But after the last year, I think he would be mad not to love you, if he can.” Connor shrugged. “So there. Was that the big secret you were shaking to confess to me?”

“One more,” said Harry, and then he closed his eyes, and he gave Connor the prepared speech he’d recited in his head about Christmas night.

He didn’t look at his brother during the recitation, and Connor didn’t interrupt. Harry found himself glad that he’d practiced the words. It drained them of most of the emotion. He could just drown himself in the patterns of light exploding behind his eyelids. They were the important things, not how he felt like he was drawing and quartering himself by telling Connor what their mother had done to him.

I hate this honesty thing, he fretted to himself. Why does it have to hurt so much?

But Connor deserved to know the truth, and it would be doubly selfish to hold something like this back from his brother—selfish in motive, and selfish because he needed it. Harry finished the recitation and bowed his head.

Connor was still quiet. Harry sneaked a look at him out of the corner of his eye, but it wasn’t helpful, because he was looking at his twin’s trainers and not his face, and trainers were not notoriously good reflectors of expression.

Then Connor spoke, in a simple, hard voice that Harry had never heard from him before. “I’m never going back to them.”

Harry blinked. “I don’t think James had anything to do with this,” he ventured. He didn’t think so. He’d been exchanging
letters with his father for a few months now, and James was still self-aggrandizing and badgering Harry about Snape, but he had calmed down and started to ask actual questions. And Harry knew Connor had been writing letters to him all along. “You don’t have to cut him out of your life.”

“I want to.”

Connor’s face had melted into a mulishly stubborn expression that Harry was all too familiar with. He shook his head, though. “Why?”

Connor looked at him as if he were mad, then ran his hands through his hair and started pacing. Harry decided it wouldn’t be politic to comment on how much he looked like James at the moment.

“All of this happened right in the same house where I was living,” said Connor. “And I never noticed. I was stupid. I’m tired of being stupid, Harry. I was stupid about Tom Riddle possessing me, and I was stupid about Sirius, and I was stupid when I was a kid. I don’t want to be stupid again. Living with Dad would make me stupid, I think. He never noticed, or he pretended not to notice, and maybe he could make me do the same thing.”

“And Mum?” Harry asked quietly.

“You don’t have to call her that just to placate me, you know.”

Harry winced, and kept still. Connor would be perceptive at the oddest times.

“She—she did all that to you.” Connor waved one hand, as much to say that he didn’t have to speak of it. “She didn’t have to. But she was willing to, from what you told me. I don’t want to live in a house with someone like that, either. Unless you really think that there’s a chance she’ll change her mind.”

Harry shook his head, and forced down the stupid, stupid tears. Talking about Lily was still hard for him, and harder since Draco wouldn’t let him hide it any more. It had been simpler when Harry could just wall him out.

“All right,” said Connor, and exhaled. “So I’m not going back to either one of them. And I’m going to try to make an effort to get along with Malfoy, as long as he makes an effort to get along with me. And I’ll go into the Lake on Saturday.” He glanced at Harry, and made an effort at a smile. It was rather ghastly. “I hope that last ‘go’ works out well.”

Harry hugged him again, because he could, and then drew his wand. “I’ll teach you those charms now, if you like.”

“Good,” said Connor, and managed to ignore the thought of impending lake water over his head for the next half hour, if the way he performed the spells was any indication. Harry watched him all the while, his dark hair falling into his hazel eyes, and his face reflecting his stubbornness and his determination.

I have a better brother than I could have imagined.

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“Mr. Potter? Please come with me.”

Harry nodded reassuringly to Draco, and slipped away from the Slytherin bench to follow McGonagall. He had noticed that Professor Dumbledore wasn’t at the head table, and wondered if the Head of Gryffindor was taking Harry to see him. He hoped not. They had avoided each other quite companionably for the last two months. Harry didn’t see why it should change now.

McGonagall led him into the side room where the Champions had gone after their choosing by the Goblet, though, and turned to face him. Harry shut the door behind him, and looked at her in question.

“A requirement of the Second Task,” said McGonagall quietly, “is that each Champion dive under the lake to rescue the person he or she misses most. You are Connor’s twin brother, Harry, and he would miss you the most. Each person must be put under a sleep spell to stay calm under the lake. I assure you that you’ll be able to breathe, and you’ll stay protected until your head is above the surface again. However, while the Headmaster will perform the sleep spell on Krum’s and Delacour’s most prized people, I know that you would not trust him to perform it on you. Will you trust me?”
Harry blinked. *So that’s the challenge. At least Dumbledore’s being sincere about his promise not to interfere with me in any way.*

“Is the charm strong enough, Professor McGonagall?” he asked. “It might just wear off me otherwise.”

The professor stared at him. “Why?”

“I trained myself to resist most sleeping charms if I wanted,” said Harry, with a shrug. “It was a precaution against being captured alive. And if I sense something while I’m under the charm, something I think is threatening, I might start trying to resist this one as well.”

McGonagall nodded slowly, though there was an ancient sadness in her eyes. Harry wondered if he was really better off for knowing, now, that it probably came from her pity for his childhood. It had been less uncomfortable when he didn’t. “I think I can assure you this one will be strong enough,” she said, and raised her wand, and began to murmur an incantation.

Sleep took Harry like darkness eating the light, and he rather gratefully let himself collapse into its waiting arms. He did hope that McGonagall would find some way to reassure Draco. If not, Draco would probably seek her out and demand an explanation anyway—

He fell.

*******

He woke with a gasp, and the sense, at once, that something was wrong. Of course, something *had* to be wrong, or he did not believe he would have awakened at all until he was above the lake.

He saw confused, hazy shapes wavering around him, and performed a wandless *Aspectus Lynics*, which he remembered, just in time, to make nonverbal. He had no idea if the charm McGonagall had performed on him would let him speak underwater. He hesitated, then added a breathing charm, just in case his other one had shattered with the sleep spell.

The shapes around him sharpened at once. Harry turned his head, and found himself tied to a stone that curved harshly, like a fish’s tail. On one side was a small girl he didn’t know, but she had long silver hair that moved back and forth slowly in the currents. He supposed she must be related to Fleur. He turned his head the other way, and stared when he saw Hermione bound to the tail.

*Krum? Is that why he was scowling the way he was at the Ball, and not paying attention to his date?*

Then the shreds of the sleeping charm uncurled, and Harry told himself to quit thinking about inane things, and concentrate on the danger that had awakened him. He stared upward. The water above him was dark, and shifted constantly in swirling patterns, but the *Aspectus Lynics* let him make out the shapes of stone huts, tethered grindylows, and swimming merfolk.

Harry felt his stomach tighten when one of them turned to look at him, and he saw the brilliant yellow eyes staring down through the water. He’d had no contact with merpeople so far. He wasn’t sure what they might want of a *vates*. Perhaps they weren’t bound—

As if in denial of that, the lake began to burn with a dull gray fire. Harry could make out the shape of the web now, more fluid than any he had seen so far, adjusting to the way that the currents and the waves moved, Harry supposed. The merfolk spun through its loops, but they tracked their progress, slowly and patiently, as if they were all the work of one constantly adjusting spider. Harry shuddered. Was that what had awakened him? The web was one of the more unpleasant he’d ever seen.

Then he realized the web was trembling. Something *else* was affecting it, something not immediately apparent, something that made Harry wonder if a second *vates* could possibly exist in the world and be unbinding the merfolk.

He didn’t have any longer to worry about it. A most peculiar shape came slicing through the weeds towards the statue to which they were tied. It took Harry a moment to work out Krum, with his head Transfigured into a hammerhead shark’s. He dodged easily past the merfolk—who didn’t pay him much attention anyway—and the grasping hands of the grindylows, and used a knife stuck in his belt to saw away at the ropes holding Hermione. They parted in a moment, and Krum grabbed her hand in his and hauled her towards the surface. Harry shook his head. *Connor isn’t going to like losing to him, if he does. Of course, Krum is behind him in points after making the Chinese Fireball smash her eggs, but*—
The web trembled again, alternating ripples of light and dark fire. Harry cried out, and a stream of bubbles rose from his mouth, though no sound did. He could feel the ripples in his own body, as though the web were inside him. Or perhaps he was inside it, by virtue of being down in the lake.

Who or what is doing that?

He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate, and at once heard a rising song. It was familiar to him. He’d last heard it in the sky where he circled on thestral-back. Before that, he’d heard it in the wards around Grimmauld Place. It was the music of the Dark, and it was calling.

But not for him, not this time, though it would gladly take him if he’d give in to it. Someone far in the distance was making it sing, making it vibrate as they did—something. Harry jerked his eyes open, and watched again as the lake filled with a haze of magic. The merfolk were swimming in a slow pattern that danced opposite the web’s. None of them paid the slightest bit of attention to the gleam of silver that was Fleur’s hair as she fought off grindylows, heading for the statue. None of them paid attention to Harry, either. He sensed they had something more important occupying their time.

The web gave a low shudder, and a moan. The merfolk abruptly cried out in a croaking, chattering way, like a band of hoarse squirrels, and flowed together in an opening, closing, unfolding fountain. Harry watched as individual merfolk spun away from each other, long dark green hair flowing behind them. Their skins were gray, almost the color of the web, and they waved their tridents and spears with fervor. Harry heard them take up the song, adding a bass note to the thundering tenor and soprano of it.

He reached out frantically, not sure what he could do, not wanting to break the web without understanding it. Heavy water weighted his limbs as he struggled, and he could see no sign of Connor. He didn’t want to break free of the ropes and cause his brother to lose points in the Second Task, but it was looking as though it might come to that.

The gray web rang as if struck with a tuning fork. The merfolk gave a concerted scream that raced up and down the scale. Harry had the distinct impression that the entire world had taken a sharp lurch to one side.

When he could see again, he made out the web still in place, but the outer edges were raveled. Perhaps it had been attached to an anchor, and the anchor was destroyed? Harry didn’t know.

His scar began to burn.

He turned his head, and saw Connor coming at last, darting under the merfolk and straight through the coils of the web, since he couldn’t see it. His eyes were wide through the bubble of the charm Harry had taught him, and he was all but fighting back terror. He would use the impulsive courage to grab Harry and pull him back to the surface, Harry knew. Nothing would probably persuade him to come under again. That was all right. Harry knew that if Fleur—caught behind a wall of impressively determined grindylows—couldn’t rescue the little girl, she would still be all right. McGonagall had reassured him of that much.

Then Harry saw the dark shape swimming around the edge of a stone hut behind Connor, a long wand clutched in his hand. His scar burned more fiercely. Harry remembered his vision of Voldemort sending Rabastan to do a certain task—a month ago.

And now he was aiming his wand at Connor’s back, this dark shape who might or might not be the same man, and a line of boiling water raced away from it, coming straight at Connor.

Harry made his decision. His brother’s life was more precious than his winning the Tournament.

He forced his wandless magic down and into his limbs—much easier to do now that he’d learned to confine it to his body—and snapped the ropes. In an instant, he rolled under and away from the statue, repeating his breathing charm as he moved, and cast a *Protego* behind Connor.

He had once read that most spells worked differently underwater. So it proved now. His shield gathered material from the lake rather than forming a wall of hardened air or magic; weeds spun into it, and stones, as well as a few startled grindylows. The boiling water hit it and bounced off. Harry was sure the dark man would have cursed; he could at least see a stream of bubbles race away from his mouth. He began kicking forward, obviously desperate to come closer.
Connor was staring at him in astonishment. Harry shook his head to indicate that he didn’t have time to explain, and grabbed Connor around the waist. He turned his head to the surface. The merfolk were between them and it, but they were too caught up in their own private celebration. Harry doubted they’d interfere.

He caught a glimpse of Rabastan from the corner of his eye, and yes, it had to be him, since his face was the same as it had been in the vision. That face had turned pale, but it was still calculating, and his eyes narrowed. Then he turned towards the little girl with silver hair, still bound to the rock.

Harry groaned in frustration and spun another Protego directly in front of the girl. He didn’t think it would hold while he took Connor to the surface and returned, though, and Connor was already starting to struggle enthusiastically, not liking the tight hold combined with the fact that he was underwater. Harry decided the best thing to do was let his brother fight beside him.

He released Connor’s waist and gestured to the little girl and the Dark wizard. Connor understood. He obviously swallowed fear, but he nodded, and then drew his wand from his waist. Given the slowness of his movements, Harry knew he wouldn’t swim fast in the attack

Go first, let Connor come up from behind and catch him unawares.

Harry called on his magic again. This had to be flashy, to distract Rabastan from both Connor and the little girl. He cast off bursts of light, gold and red bursts that luckily still worked the way they were supposed to. Rabastan turned towards him.

Harry grimly swam forward, letting the starbursts whirl around him, and thinking frantically. His main disadvantage was not knowing how his spells would work underwater, and he wanted something with non-lethal force. The image of Rodolphus dying in a fall of ashes above this very same lake was still burned into his mind whenever he entered battle. Harry hated killing. It gave people no more chances to change. If he could win the battle and protect Connor and the little girl without killing Rabastan, then he would.

Use defensive magic, then.

Harry cast Haurio. The jade-green shield engulfed his hand, then unexpectedly spread further around him, enclosing him in a bright bubble of air and warmth. Harry dropped to the floor of it, and blinked. The bubble went on expanding, blanketing the little girl in its protection, and spreading towards Rabastan.

The Death Eater gestured with his wand and spat a stream of bubbles, and the shield stopped. Rabastan eyed Harry for a moment, his head lifted and his lips pinched tight in disdain. Harry stared back. Was this all he came to do? Attack who he could, hurt who he could?

Then he turned sharply, and fired another spell to the side. Harry swung his head, and saw a puff of blood explode through the water as whatever spell Rabastan had used cut deeply into Connor.

No.

The savage strength that rose up in him then wasn’t the wild anger that had driven him against Umbridge and Lily; this was the old rage, the kind that had let him fight Bellatrix and Rodolphus on the Quidditch Pitch in the first year. He had been trained to protect his brother, forged to protect his brother. He reached out and drew on what was around him, as he had on the Bludger that returned both Bellatrix and Rodolphus to Azkaban for a time.

The Haurio shield bent a bit, and then exploded. Shards of deep green bubble danced in the water, formed into a school on Harry’s will, and flew straight at Rabastan. Slice after slice after slice, and he began to bleed. He was already bubbling as he muttered spells that probably healed his wounds, but the shards turned and came at him again. It would be like being caught in a constant rain of falling glass, Harry knew. At least he wouldn’t be able to fire another spell.

He kicked straight for Connor. He was a passable swimmer, and got there quickly. Beneath the thick red water, Connor floated, his eyes shut, the charm around his face at least letting him breathe. A long slice ran from his right shoulder down and across his chest, then turned and swirled across his abdomen. Harry could see the slick gleam of his brother’s intestines.

He’ll die of blood loss if I don’t do something, he thought, refusing to let himself feel emotion. I have to put pressure on the
wound.

He bore down with all his might, and called another Protego, this time a small one. It forced itself down onto the injury, treating the blood as the enemy, binding it inside. Harry thought he could depend on the hardened weave of weed and stones to last until he reached the surface.

He turned back around, in time to see Rabastan Vanishing the dark green shards. Then he faced the little silver-haired girl. Fleur, finally free of the grindylows, was coming up as fast as she could swim, but Harry didn’t think she would be in time.

She didn’t have to be. Harry was rather tired of Rabastan, though still not tired enough to kill him. The tight rage didn’t permit that.

Sleep, he thought, in a combination of Legilimency and savage will. He should have done this in the first place, but he hadn’t been angry enough to force his command on another person. Rabastan trembled and went limp now.

Harry swam for the surface, his arms clasped tightly around Connor. The Protego held. He would save Connor. None of the intestines had fallen out. His brother was going to be all right. He would hold to that.

He broke the surface of the lake, and his breathing charm dissipated. He could hear shouts from the stands, but they fell into a momentary breathless silence when he hauled Connor onto the shore.

Then shouts rose again, and Harry saw McGonagall coming down at a run, her face deathly pale. A dark shape intercepted her, though. Snape slid to his knees beside Connor and stared at him, then at Harry.

“Get him to Madam Pomfrey,” said Harry, not recognizing his own voice. He was freezing in the crisp February air. “Slicing Curse.” He turned and plunged back into the lake, renewing his breathing charm, ignoring the shout of his name in Draco’s voice.

He dived down again, kicking, squirming, descending. He ignored the gray coils of the web, though they felt slimy as they slid along his skin, and the dancing merfolk, who stared straight through him. Rabastan was going to be where he left him.

He was. Harry came close enough to see the bubbles rising out of his mouth. His breathing charm still held.

This close, Harry felt himself begin to tremble. He wanted nothing so much as to use the Slicing Curse on Rabastan. That much, he thought, just that much Dark magic, and he could breathe.

Music soared in his ears.

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes, tightly. There were more important matters at stake here, including questions that Rabastan could answer only if he was alive. How had he got into the school, past the wards that Harry had thought were closed to all Death Eaters now? And what had been his mission? To kill Connor? Did Voldemort want the publicly known Boy-Who-Lived dead, so there was no chance Connor could defeat him?

No. No, I don’t think so. Voldemort spoke in the vision of causing his enemies pain and worry. I think Rabastan was assigned to kill Connor so that it would affect me.

The rage was close, if he let it in.

Harry did not let it in. He looped the discarded ropes—Fleur had freed her sister, or her cousin, or whoever the little girl really was, and gone—around Rabastan’s body and hauled him towards the surface. They reached it easily enough. Harry floated carefully in the water, hearing the eager shouts begin again, then swam for the shore. He let everyone get a good, long look at the floating Death Eater. If his brother wasn’t safe anywhere in the school, Harry wanted everyone to know it.

“Who’s that?” most people seemed to be asking, which was no help at all.

Harry liked to think that if he were going to be forced into making a dramatic display anyway, then he might as well use it for something. He pulled Rabastan out of the water and drew back his sleeve, baring the Dark Mark on his left forearm. He held it high.
The screams were instant. Harry smiled. He knew it wasn’t a pretty expression, but he could imagine the ripples that would spread out from here. The Daily Prophet would be lucky if it reported the news much before most ordinary wizards and witches heard it by word of mouth. A Death Eater! A Death Eater in Hogwarts!

Harry let out a sharp breath, then, as someone collided with him. He realized a moment later that the arms wound about his waist were Draco’s, and that Draco was hugging him as though he were afraid Harry would plunge back into the lake again.

“Don’t do that to me,” Draco whispered. “Please, don’t do that to me.”

This is one of the painful things about loving me, Harry thought. All he could really say, as he relaxed into the embrace and rested his arms on Draco’s shoulders, was, “I’ll try not to.”

“Harry.”

Harry glanced up at Snape. His guardian wore an expression Harry hadn’t seen in months: so fiercely protective that he seemed likely to grab Harry and lock him in a secure room at a moment’s notice.

“Your brother will live.”

Harry closed his eyes, and wondered how many of the drops of wetness starring his eyelids were tears.

“And I think you had best bring your prisoner along for questioning,” Snape added. “After relieving him of his wand, of course. We will put him in the Great Hall.”

“This is to be public, then, sir?” Harry asked quietly.

“Oh, very much so.”

Harry looked at Snape on that last word. Snape was staring at Dumbledore.

“I would very much like to know,” breathed Snape, “how, with the Headmaster in charge of the wards, Death Eaters continue to get into Hogwarts.”

Harry shook a bit, but he wasn’t sure if it was with cold or anger. Dumbledore’s face wore the usual calm smile, as he tried to quiet the excited shrieks around him.

“I’d like to know that, too,” whispered Harry.

And why the hell the gray web in the water was wavering, and what Dumbledore knows about it.

*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Five: A Man’s Soul May Waver

Harry wondered what he should be feeling as he followed Snape, who was levitating Rabastan, into the Great Hall, and as Draco tagged anxiously after them. He supposed it was almost anything but what he actually was feeling at the moment: a mixture of outrage, irritation, anxiety over Connor, and low-simmering resentment that it took him a moment to identify.

This has happened enough. What else could I do but what I’ve done? I can’t keep Death Eaters out of the school if the wards aren’t watched. And if Dumbledore is not watching the wards…

He wanted answers so badly he could smell them. But they had to deal with Rabastan first.

At least Snape was making it public, Harry mused, as Snape bound Rabastan to the surface of the Hufflepuff table with the ropes that Harry had brought up from the lake. His guardian’s face was almost calm, but Harry didn’t think that would last for long. Snape stepped back when he was done and glanced once at Harry.

“You have his wand?”
Harry nodded and patted his robe pocket, where Rabastan’s wand lay. It had sparked at him when he picked it up, perhaps
reflecting its owner’s anger, but as long as it was actually separate from Rabastan’s hand, it could not harm anyone else.
Harry would keep a hold on it just in case Rabastan had the ability to summon it to him.

“Good,” said Snape, and then aimed his own wand at Rabastan. “Ennervate!”

Rabastan twitched, once, and then woke up. Harry could see the moment when he realized he was captive. His eyes widened
once, and then he turned his head and met Snape’s gaze with the calmness of someone who expected torture and was bracing
himself to resist it.

“Severus,” he said. “I haven’t seen you in a while. Still defending children, I take it? And enjoying it? I suppose such a life
would content someone who had the smallness of soul that enabled him to turn from our Lord.”

Snape showed no reaction to the taunts, but watched Rabastan with a still face. Harry heard a slight murmur behind them, and
glanced over his shoulder. Most of the Tournament crowd had filed in. Harry could make out Krum and Fleur and their
former hostages near the front. Zacharias Smith had found Hermione and was expostulating at her. Hermione ignored him
entirely, eyes on Rabastan. Harry wondered if she was fascinated by the chance to see a real live Death Eater up close, or if
she wanted to see the person who had nearly murdered Connor face justice.

Draco peered into his face, and Harry gave him a half-smile and touched his arm before turning back to the interrogation.

“I want to ask you this only once, Rabastan,” said Snape. “How did you get into the school?”

Rabastan snorted at him. “And what makes you think that I’m going to answer, Severus?” He appeared a bit bolder now.
Maybe the lack of thumbscrews comforts him, Harry thought. “The secrets of our Lord are his secrets alone, and I would
rather go to jail than betray them. I’ve done it before.”

“You faced Ministry interrogators then,” said Snape. “Aurors. Perhaps Unspeakables.” He spun his wand through a few lazy
revolutions. “The difference, Rabastan, is that this time you’re facing me.”

Rabastan tilted his head, eyes glinting. “I’m not going to tell you anything. I said that already.”

Snape stood still. Harry could sense the coiled strength gathering in him, though, and wasn’t surprised at all when he said
only, “Pity.”

He performed a spell then. Harry supposed that it must have been nonverbal, which was its own pity, since he didn’t
recognize the effects. Rabastan’s mouth went slack. He stared at the air in front of his own face, and then whimpered, an
astonishing sound. Harry could see his eyes dilating with the force of his terror. He trembled, and tried to lift a hand to shield
his eyes, but the ropes had done their work, and he could only spasm a bit.

“I will give you to them,” Snape said. “You know they don’t eat enough, Rabastan. Tell me. How did you get into the
school? That is twice that I have had to ask that question. I shall not ask a third time.” He moved his wand a bit, and Rabastan
let out a pitiful scream.

Harry searched inside himself for some compassion for Rabastan. He found none. This was the man who had tried to kill
Connor, who had probably come to kill Connor, who had almost succeeded.

I don’t want him dead, but I want him to suffer.

And there was the dark rage he had despised in himself, rising again. Harry took a deep breath, and trampled it down, and
took several steps forward until he stood beside his guardian. Rabastan didn’t look at him, though Harry had thought he
would at least merit a glare.

“Professor Snape,” he said softly. “Please stop, sir. This isn’t the best way to get answers out of him.”

Snape looked at him, and said nothing. Rabastan was gasping now, sobbing some words out and choking others. Harry
listened, but could make out nothing more than “wards.” This wasn’t helping them, and now he suspected that Snape had
wanted to use whatever spell this was partly because he was angry.
He thought *Finite Incantatem* as strongly as he could.

Rabastan gave one more great jerk and then relaxed against his bonds. Snape continued watching Harry. Harry ignored him. Let the watchers think Snape had given in to mercy and ended the spell of his own free will. He leaned forward and said, in a voice that he at least managed to make soft if not friendly, “What was that? How did you get into the school?”

“Don’t ask a third time,” whispered Rabastan. “I told you. One of the Dark Lord’s servants helped me find a way through the wards. They were weak already.”

“Weak already.” Snape’s voice was flat. “What does that mean?”

“I think that you should let me take over the interrogation now, Severus.”

Harry could feel Dumbledore’s power filling the room as he spoke, as if he carried a cloak of light about him that he had spread and shaken. The air seemed sweeter, and Harry heard some of the watchers let out a rising and falling murmur that complemented the subtle song of his magic. Everything would be all right, said the voice of that magic, as long as everyone trusted in the Headmaster and let him handle things. More than just an edge of compulsion was wed to it, and Harry wondered for a moment how many of Dumbledore’s famous speeches, the ones where he managed to reassure everyone and coax them into facing Voldemort one more time, came from his magical strength and not his oratory.

Snape wavered. He would be fighting the blow in his head, Harry knew, but the suddenness of it and the sheer strength made it impossible for him to oppose Dumbledore immediately. He stood in silence, and made it look as if he were acquiescing. Dumbledore nodded and turned to Rabastan.

Harry raised his own power.

At once, the Headmaster turned to look at him. His eyes were narrowed, his face still deceptively kind.

“Would you make this the kind of contest you spoke of wanting to avoid, Harry?” he murmured. His lips barely moved. “The kind that would destroy half of Britain if we began it?”

“No, sir,” said Harry. He stared hard at Dumbledore’s eyes, and wondered what was behind them. Had Dumbledore lost the brilliance once attributed to him, or had he misplaced it, or had most of it not been more than trickery in the first place? Of course, that did not matter, because this was most assuredly trickery now. It was only Harry’s curiosity that made him want to know.

“Then, please, step back and let me handle this.” Strips of steel undergirded Dumbledore’s voice.

“Don’t try that again, sir,” he said.
Dumbledore merely looked at him in silence, and then said, when some moments had passed and the loudest sound near Harry was Rabastan’s harsh breathing, “Try what, Harry?”

Harry closed his eyes. The dark rage was rising again. He really wanted to hurt someone. At this point, though, he wasn’t sure if the impulse came as much from a desire to revel in pain as because he thought it might finally get things accomplished.

“You are being stupid, and we do not have time for this,” he said, his voice clipped. He turned to Rabastan. “You had help from a servant of the Dark Lord’s. What servant of the Dark Lord’s?”

Rabastan stopped breathing for a moment. Then he shook his head. “That you will have to tear from me,” he murmured. “If you do not already know this, then you shall not learn it from—”

“Legimens.”

Harry didn’t tear into Rabastan’s mind. He didn’t need to. He skimmed in through Rabastan’s eyes, and into a thick, clinging mist that he suspected was not a protection, but the natural state of the man’s thoughts. Rabastan was an unlikely candidate to be a practicing Occlumens.

The fog around him writhed for a moment, then blew aside, and the image that Rabastan was thinking about most strongly whirled up behind his eyes. Harry saw Moody with the silver collar around his neck, one hand extended as though he were grasping someone’s arm.

Harry rode the wind back out again, and dropped Rabastan back on the table. The man didn’t seem to know quite what had happened. Harry spun, and intently scanned the crowd, still standing tame and docile under Dumbledore’s power. He could see Professor McGonagall, Professor Sprout, Professor Flitwick, Professor Sinistra craning her neck to see from the back…

No Professor Moody.

Harry’s mind locked on to the obvious. Rabastan’s strike failed. So he’s going after Connor instead.

“Moody,” he snarled at Snape, and crouched, pressing against the anti-Apparition wards. In a way, he didn’t want to do this, since he would be shaking when he got to the hospital wing, but Merlin knew what might happen to Connor in the time it would take him to run up the stairs.

He felt someone grip his shoulder just as he jumped, and Harry grabbed the hand back, managing to Side-Along Apparate the person with him. Unsurprisingly, when he dropped out of the tight-squeezing leap and rolled on the floor of the hospital wing, it was Snape who fell to one knee beside him.

“I told you so that you could stay behind and inform the others!” Harry snarled, forcing himself up again. “Now what’s going to happen if we both die up here, and no one else except Rabastan knows—”

“Imperio.”

The calmly-spoken Curse soared past Harry, though he felt the wind of its cruel passage. Harry saw Snape’s face become incredibly calm. There was a brief flicker, as though he were fighting against the spell with all his Occlumency, but it subsided in a few moments.

Just as the dragons did. It would take someone with an Imperius Curse of incredible power to do that, and to capture Snape —

Mulciber. I should have known.

Harry turned in time to see Mulciber, no longer Polyjuiced or Transfigured into Moody, rise from behind the nearest hospital bed. “Wretched, to crouch like that,” he remarked, swatting dust from his robes. He stepped forward. He was wearing a robe fitted for a smaller man, as Moody was, and the bared Dark Mark on his left arm was enough to make Harry’s scar glow in dull pain. The silver collar still encircled his neck. “But I had to be sure that you wouldn’t see me immediately and do something that you would regret.”
“You bastard—” Harry said.

Mulciber, his eyes fixed on him, didn’t speak aloud, but the next moment Harry heard a dull thunk from his side. He turned to find that Snape had picked up a knife sitting on a table, no doubt to cut clothes or tight bindings away from a patient if a spell wouldn’t do any good, and stuck it into his own hand. Blood flowed from the wound, which was deep enough to cause permanent damage if not treated, but Snape’s expression didn’t change.

Harry tried to think of Snape with damaged hands, missing hands, and felt his stomach rebel.

“I can have him remove his fingers,” said Mulciber, his voice low. “I thought Rabastan would betray me. I have no options left, Potter. You’re talking to a desperate man here. I have nothing to lose. Do not push me.”

He paused, then added in a lighter tone, “And even if you were willing to kill your guardian, I don’t think you’re willing to let me kill him.” He gestured at the seemingly empty bed, and the Disillusionment Charm rolled away, revealing Connor. He was bound in bandages, but Harry could see that his open, glazed eyes also bore the look of Imperius.

Mulciber turned back to Harry. His face was calm, but there was an underlying excitement that told Harry he was on the edge, soothing expression or not. “I rather think,” said Mulciber, “that we should come to an understanding.”

Harry watched him, breathing hard. He could probably blast Mulciber before he could order either Connor or Snape to do permanent harm to themselves.

Probably.

But he had heard stories of what Mulciber was capable of doing during Voldemort’s War, including commanding victims to drop dead of heart attacks. His control of the Imperius Curse was very fine. Harry could not be absolutely sure that Mulciber would die or fall unconscious before he sent an order like that at Snape or Connor, and that was an unacceptable level of risk.

“All right,” he said. “Talk to me. What kind of arrangement are you talking about?”

Mulciber stared at him intently, then said, “I think you can put the knife down now, Severus. Stand beside the table where you put it, just so that Potter here doesn’t forget what I could have you do.”

Harry watched as Snape obeyed the order with a perfectly blank face. Oh, Merlin, you must be fighting so hard inside your head right now. I’m so sorry, sir.

“Now, Potter, I suggest you cast a locking charm on the door,” said Mulciber, his eyes hard. “I have Madam Pomfrey sitting comfortably in her office, but it won’t be long before someone else comes here, and I would rather not be interrupted. Your magic is more powerful than mine.”

Hating himself, Harry looked at the doors to the hospital wing and poured out a flood of pure will, as he had when he made Rabastan go to sleep. The doors gave a deep shudder and then ground together in a way that said they wouldn’t be opening for a while. Harry felt sick fear swirling just beneath his stomach nonetheless. Dumbledore would be able to command the doors to open if he really tried, as the ultimate master of Hogwarts in times of danger.

“That will do,” said Mulciber. “Now, Mr. Potter, do you realize that you have given me the hardest time in making my decision?” His voice was quite cheerful.

Harry turned back towards him, and told himself to ignore whatever he might think of the encounter’s surreality. This was quite real, and someone was going to die if he forgot it. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Mulciber moved back near the head of Connor’s bed. One hand reached out, and Harry had to watch as Mulciber stroked his brother’s hair. “I mean that for some time now, I have been doubting whether the Dark Lord’s service is really what I want to do with my life,” the Death Eater said. “Granted, I went to Azkaban for him, but since my release, I’ve had to watch every plan that I was told would work thwarted at every turn. Even my coming here in disguise as Moody didn’t do much good, not when Bellatrix’s first attack on you failed and then I realized you would sense almost any use of the Imperius Curse the moment I made it. I tried talking to you, seeing if there was anything in you that we could use, and of course the crowd at the First Task made the Curse safer than usual. But you foiled all my tests. You’ve convinced me that you can resist my greatest
weapon. More, I’m convinced that you can resist the Dark Lord. I don’t want to be on the losing side. I’ve had enough of that—thirteen years too much of that. I want to strike a bargain with you.”

“A damn strange way you’ve got of doing it,” Harry whispered. “I can trust nothing you say, you realize that?”

“Of course you can,” said Mulciber. “Understand, I was meant to make much more progress here than I have. But I haven’t made much, and it’s only partly because my Lord told me it would be easier to get control of you than it is. I wanted to avoid your notice if I could, but I was also trying to limit my crimes, so that they wouldn’t tell against me too much when I made my final appeal to you. I had to cast the Curse at the First Task, and I had to test it on you, and I had to let Rabastan through the wards, only because my Lord commanded me to, and disobeying those orders would have revealed my wavering loyalty to him. But, otherwise, I have caused you far less damage than I could have, Potter.”

Harry turned and stared at his brother.

“Rabastan was assigned to kill him,” said Moody, without a trace of apology in his voice. “Not me. I did try to persuade him out of it, but he was adamant that our Lord wanted it done perfectly. He’s a coward, anyway, under pressure. I could never have trusted him. Nor should you, even if tries to claim that he’ll give you evidence willingly.”

“You were here,” Harry whispered.

“Only because I knew what the consequences would be when you brought in Rabastan alive, with you a Legilimens, and I wanted to be sure that I could make you listen to me.” Mulciber gave Connor’s hair another stroke. Harry choked on his rising gorge. There were other stories about Mulciber, too, stories that made Harry flinch when he wondered if any of the younger children were missing memories. “I’m only trying to secure my position, Potter, my position and my life. I’ve seen what you are. The tests taught me that. I was trying to cast the Curse on you during that little duel we had, without you noticing under the cover of my simpler spells, and it didn’t even work. Your mind’s too well-trained for my subtler efforts, and I think you remember the one overt effort I made, don’t you?”

Harry nodded. His eyes were fastened on Connor. He had an idea now, but the time it would take, the time… It made him despair.

*It’s an unacceptable risk.*

“Yes, I thought so. Damn Memory Charms won’t work on a damn Legilimens most of the time,” muttered Mulciber. He tilted his head, and his eyes glinted coldly at Harry. “But, I assure you, let me turn, and I’d be loyal enough to you. You’re going to win the War. You’re strong in a way that the Dark Lord could not be, because he can’t inspire enough loyalty, and Dumbledore’s blinded himself. You’ve accepted other former Death Eaters. Why not me?”

Harry could have listed the differences between someone like Hawthorn Parkinson and someone like Mulciber for minutes on end, but he preferred to say, “You didn’t say anything about Dumbledore noticing your use of the Imperius Curse. Why was that?”

Mulciber snorted. “Oh, I’m certain that he must know *something*. I enchanted Professor McGonagall and told her to put your name in the Goblet of Fire, back when I thought this waiting game the Dark Lord’s playing had a chance in hell of working. It would have bound you to compete in the Tournament; it should have, since you’re the strongest wizard here. But Dumbledore interfered. He would have known that your name went into the Goblet, though, when he examined it.”

Harry swallowed, twice, before he could say, “So he knew that someone here had put my name in the Goblet?”

“He would have known, yes,” said Mulciber blandly. “Of course, he would have seen that it was McGonagall if he looked, and I Obliviated her after she’d done it, but he would have been able to find me if he’d looked hard enough.” He tapped the silver collar. “Would this have kept a Legilimens as skilled as he is out? Who knows?”

Harry tried to tamp down the bubble of rage. Dumbledore hadn’t been letting a Death Eater run around the school *knowingly*. The silver collar was a factor. The ones on the Hounds the Ministry had interrogated had almost killed them when they came off. Dumbledore might well have sensed that the collar was linked to Moody’s—Mulciber’s—life and backed off from killing one of his professors. Besides, Mulciber was trying to flatter Harry into accepting him. He was going to say anything he could to make himself sound wise, knowledgeable, attractive.
But Dumbledore had known someone had put Harry’s name in the Goblet of Fire, and he had never mentioned it.

**Headmaster, you and I will have much to talk about when this is done.**

“I want to know about the wards,” said Harry, carefully letting no animosity color his tone. “How did you let Rabastan in? How did Bellatrix attack, for that matter? I know you must have been the one who sent her wand back to her,” he added.

Mulciber smiled. “Very good, Potter. Well, the wards have been weakened by a number of things.” He leaned against Connor’s bed, as though he were in for a long storytelling session. Harry clamped his lips down on the growl he wanted to give when Mulciber’s hand wandered to Connor’s shoulder. “I’ve been key’d to the wards as most of the professors are, and I used that to let Bellatrix through. Of course, I’ve been casting Imperius when I thought you wouldn’t notice, or when you were absent from the school, and getting some of the professors to weaken the wards—small holes that no one would notice without a close inspection. But part of it was caused by Dumbledore’s incompetence. That will not have surprised you, of course. He’s been paying attention to the wards in the school, which he can use to spy on people, and that draws his attention and energy away from the ones on the outside. The wards of Hogwarts are linked to its Headmaster in ways that go back to the Founders’ times, and which I certainly don’t completely understand. They draw on his strength. Usually, of course, that wouldn’t be a problem, since Dumbledore’s so powerful. But in this case, he overlooked the holes I had the professors create, and he may have made them bigger, since he was diverting strength normally used outside to the inside. He’s not used to using all these wards in the windows and the walls. He’s overtaxing himself.” Mulciber gave a nonchalant little shrug, watching Harry closely.

The rage was choking Harry, sticking strong claws through his skin. He felt as if he were bristling with thorns. His desires had shifted, and at the moment, it wasn’t just anyone he wanted to see bleeding, it was Dumbledore.

*So he’s been spying on us, too. Or on me, I suppose it’s safe to say.*

Harry closed his eyes and mastered his rage. Just in time, too, as someone knocked on the doors.

Harry looked back at Mulciber, and saw his eyes flick in the doors’ direction. “Well, Potter?” His voice was light, but tense. “What’s it going to be? Are you going to accept me, or do your mentor and your brother die? Or worse, you know,” he added, softly. “Some of those people they think are mad from the Cruciatus in St. Mungo’s are those I commanded to act as if they were suffering intense pain.”

Harry stared into his eyes. There could be no question of accepting someone who did this and showed not the slightest bit of remorse as an ally. On the other hand, the one plan he had thought of, being able to enter Connor’s and Snape’s minds and pick the Imperius apart as he would a web, was simply not going to work. He wasn’t familiar enough with the Curse. The one time he’d destroyed a mental web without study—the web of Remus’s Obliviate—it had nearly been a disaster. And Mulciber might sense him moving in their thoughts, too, and that would be the end as soon as he began it.

Mulciber’s eyes darkened as he watched. “Choose, Potter,” he said quietly, as steady pounding began on the door. “I told you, I have nothing to lose. I’ll still have the pleasure of making you suffer if you don’t see sense.” His hand tightened on Connor’s shoulder in silent warning.

Harry shuddered a bit. He could not use Legilimency on Mulciber, or the same silent command that had made Rabastan sleep, since he could not get through the barrier of the silver collar. There was really only one plan he could think of, and he would have liked some extra time to nerve himself up to doing it.

*No time.*

“Choose, Potter.”

Harry gulped and nodded. “I have,” he said. “I—I’ll accept you. I can’t not do it.” He paused, and tilted his head at an arrogant angle. “Just make sure that you’ve told me the truth, that’s all.”

Mulciber’s face melted into a smile. “I assure you,” he said, “you won’t be able to catch me lying.” He glanced between Snape and Connor. “Of course, I don’t think I’ll take the Imperius off them just yet. I want some guarantee from you first, such as an oath.”

“No Unbreakable Vow?” Harry asked.
Mulciber blinked, startled, but then nodded. “That will work,” he said. “Severus can act as our Bonder.”

Harry knew he would get no better chance, with Mulciber turning towards Snape to call him closer. He had hoped to win his brother and Snape free of the Curse first, just in case, but there was no time.

_I am the one who will have to live with myself afterwards._

Harry fixed his eyes on the silver collar around Mulciber’s neck and pushed his wandless magic outwards, hard and fast, giving no warning of his actions, not changing his expression. _Break._

The silver collar shattered into a thousand ringing shards, and Mulciber dropped to his knees with a scream of pain. Harry had already moved, had already willed it.

He had willed it, and so the silver shards turned, arrested in their flight, and cut straight into Mulciber’s throat.

The scream cut off into a choking gurgle, and then Mulciber’s life poured out of him in a red flood. He landed hard on the floor. Harry knew the moment when he died; it came within a moment after the shards pierced him.

He shut his eyes, shaking.

He couldn’t just have thrown up Shield Charms in front of his brother and Snape. That wouldn’t protect them from the monster lurking in their heads. And Mulciber might have been able to concentrate through the pain of the collar’s breaking and reach out at any time, faster than Harry could get him to go to sleep. Even this plan wasn’t without risk; maybe Mulciber would use that split second to make his enemies suffer rather than suffering himself.

But he hadn’t been able to, as great pain was followed with greater pain, and then death on its heels.

Harry swallowed, and wondered if it was a good thing or a condemnation of himself that his eyes were dry. He turned to face Snape, and saw sense and awareness returning to his face, along with burning fury. He obviously knew something of what had happened to him, and hated it.

Harry nodded, walked up to him, and clasped his wounded hand. “You should get Madam Pomfrey to look at this, sir.”

Snape reached out with the unwounded hand and held Harry’s chin tightly for a moment, staring into his eyes. Harry stared back steadily, until he thought Snape might have seen what he wanted to see, and then wrenched away and looked at Connor.

His brother had fallen back into unconsciousness. Harry relaxed. _I’ll tell him eventually, but better if he doesn’t remember anything of this while his pain is so great._

“Mr. Potter, what—“

Pomfrey’s speech died as she saw the body on the floor next to Connor’s bed. She blinked, then turned to Snape, apparently operating on instinct as she cast a spell to heal his hand.

The pounding on the doors was intense now. Harry wearily willed them into letting go of each other. They sank back into the natural shape of the stone, and then opened at once as an excited flood of professors and spectators poured through.

Harry closed his eyes. _I killed someone else. Someone is dead because of me._

_But now I know I would do it again. He was threatening them. He needed to die. There was no other plan I could think of so quickly._

“Harry. It was not your fault.”

Harry opened his eyes at his guardian’s voice, but didn’t turn to look at him. “I know,” he said quietly. “I did what needed to be done. Maybe that’s one lesson I’ve learned now, not to leave my enemies alive behind me.”

He caught a glimpse of a white beard through the crowd, and his rage spiked.
“Excuse me, Madam Pomfrey,” he murmured. “Is Professor Snape fit to come with me?”

“I am perfectly capable—” Snape began.

“Shut up, Severus,” said Madam Pomfrey. “Yes, Mr. Potter, he will do. But don’t ask him to hold his wand in his right hand for some hours yet.”

Harry nodded, his eyes still fixed on Dumbledore. This has gone on long enough. Dumbledore is going to listen to me this time. And I know what punishment I’m going to exact on him, once I’ve determined exactly what the state of the wards is. There are a lot of things I should have done before and didn’t do. Well. Now I know to do them.

“It is most unusual of you to wait for someone else, Harry,” Snape muttered, as he stepped up beside him.

“I need you with me,” said Harry simply. “I want you to restrain me from killing the Headmaster, if it comes to that. And with the mood I’m in, it might.”

He set off through the crowd with a determined stride. Dumbledore had backed out of the room, but he would not go far, and Harry would find him even if he did.

It is time to make it clear where we stand.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Six: Harry’s Stake

Draco had followed everyone else to the hospital wing, though he’d lingered behind out of necessity. Harry’s distress reached across the distance that separated them, as piercing as the exhaustion that had made Draco faint on the day before the First Task. This time, though, he couldn’t faint, because the emotions were not exhaustion—a simple heavy pressure—but the chill slime of guilt, and the stone wall of determination, and a vision of looking down a long, starless well that Draco had learned to identify as Harry’s self-loathing.

Harry might have survived whatever happened in the hospital wing, but he would need Draco when he came out.

And he did, for all that when he finally managed to force his way through the crowd outside the doors of the hospital wing, he didn’t look as if he needed anyone. Draco caught his breath at the sight of Harry’s face, so grimly resolved that he thought his father would have bowed his head and stepped aside. Harry looked as if he were going to an execution or a battle. He hated what he was doing, or so Draco knew from the emotions he radiated, but nothing would stop him from doing it. Events had finally kicked him past his reluctance to bring attention to himself, or to interfere with other people. Things were going to happen now.

Draco pushed himself away from the wall, letting his own pride and awe and love support him in the face of those overwhelming emotions, and stepped up to Harry’s side.

Harry’s green eyes had been absolutely fixed on the path ahead of him, as if nailed there, but they turned and met Draco’s now. They flickered when Harry realized who it was. He inclined his head in a rapid nod, and then turned forward and strode on again, as if pushed by a great wind.

Draco smiled and fell into place at Harry’s right shoulder. He may hate what he’s going to do, but not everyone does. I rather intend to enjoy it. I’m just glad that he doesn’t have empathy that matches mine.

******

Harry hated on what he had to do as he walked.

He was setting the limits in his mind, drawing them sharply, reminding himself of what he could not do, no matter how angry he became. There were Snape and Draco behind him—and he trusted Draco to restrain him even more than Snape—but they were more flexible on matters of free will than Harry was. They might think it reasonable for Harry to do everything that was
against Dumbledore’s will, simply because the Headmaster was an enemy right now.

Harry didn’t want to. He had had enough of that. He would demand information. He would make absolutely sure that Dumbledore had rules established for his interaction with the wards and the protection of the school after this. He would make it understood how very, very displeased he was that Dumbledore had told him nothing about McGonagall also entering Harry’s name in the Goblet. Dumbledore had rigged it so that only Connor’s name would come out, of course, but that still meant he had no right to ignore the danger Mulciber presented. He should have told Harry about this on Christmas night, if not sooner.

Harry could feel the throb of the Headmaster’s power spreading out before him. Dumbledore had retreated to the Great Hall, and gone no farther. He intended to make a stand there.

Harry wondered why at first. The more public this was, the worse it would be for Dumbledore. But he understood it when he stepped through the doors of the Great Hall and met a number of skeptical and surprised gazes. Dumbledore was using mild compulsion on the witnesses. What they saw might not be what they thought they were seeing.

Harry snarled in spite of himself, and felt the Dark rage, thestral-like, stamp its hooves inside him. This was why he might lose control and destroy all his own fine intentions. He could have dealt with Dumbledore endangering him as only a breach of his promise, the way he could have dealt with Mulciber threatening him as just what a Death Eater would do. For someone to threaten his own life was no more than what he expected. To threaten or hurt other people…

This must be dealt with first.

Harry took a moment to glance over his shoulder and make sure that Snape and Draco were free. Snape nodded slightly to him, indicating that he once again had his Occlumency shields braced against the onslaught, though he might not be able to speak. Draco moved nearer and rested his hand on Harry’s shoulder. The slight haze in his eyes cleared at once.

Using his empathy and his focus on me to chase away the compulsion, Harry decided, and then turned to face Dumbledore.

“Let them go,” he said quietly. “Now.”

The Headmaster watched him in silence for long moments. He had a look that Harry had never seen in his eyes before. This was probably the way he appeared on the field of battle, Harry reflected. His gaze was clear, but testing, and his magic swirled lazily around his body, a barely visible silver shimmer in the air, gathering and coiling its strength beneath it like a tiger about to spring.

“I would feel better,” said Dumbledore at last, “if I knew what you were planning.”

“I am planning to make you answer for your crimes,” said Harry. “And that means that you will answer me as to the state of the wards, as to the state of the gray web holding the merfolk in the lake, as to why a Death Eater could roam the school unsupervised and cast the Imperius on the professors, and as to why you never informed me that Professor McGonagall had put my name in the Goblet of Fire.”

“I did not.”

Harry blinked at McGonagall as she stepped forward from the crowd of mute, fascinated, staring people. He frowned when he looked at her, and especially when he saw Dumbledore’s frown. Apparently, McGonagall should still have been under his compulsion. How had she broken free?

A line of blue light crawling down from the ceiling answered that. It lapped around McGonagall’s feet like a pool of spreading water—one of the wards of Hogwarts, reaching out to her.

Harry gave a smile he was sure was hard, and glanced at Dumbledore. “The wards seem to prefer the Deputy Headmistress to you, Headmaster,” he said softly. “Is that because you’ve been abusing them?”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed. “You do not know what you are saying, Harry,” he murmured. “As always, you think only of the immediate ramifications of your actions, and not of the consequences that might lie out of sight. Consider what will happen if you drag private matters into the public sphere.”
“I hardly think your incompetence a matter for privacy any more,” said Harry, moving a few steps forward. “Professor McGonagall, you were put under Imperius to place my name in the Goblet of Fire, and then Mulciber, in disguise as Moody, Memory Charmed you into forgetting that you’d done it. Dumbledore would have known at least that you had put my name in, if he had looked. Given that he’s using these wards to spy on people, he could have known far more than that. But he never bothered to inform either you or me.”

“You cannot trust what a Death Eater tells you, Harry.” Dumbledore’s voice was deep, a song of flowing water. The people under his control were swaying slowly back and forth, Harry noted, though the motion was so slight he would not have noticed it if McGonagall weren’t standing still. “I did not investigate the matter because I assumed that Minerva simply wanted you to enter the Tournament. That is all.”

“I do not feel I can trust you either, Light Lord.” Harry tilted his head back. “Release these people.”

“Harry—“

“Do you really fear them seeing and hearing the truth?” Harry asked. From the storm gathering in McGonagall’s face, he could see why Dumbledore would, but he could hardly admit it if he wanted to present himself as acting in good faith. “Release them. I will not ask you again.”

Dumbledore just shook his head, his face now wearing a patient smile. For all his wariness, Harry thought, he still believed he could win, and that it would just take a few stronger applications of his old tricks. “Harry, you are a child in age, for all your experience. There are many things you do not understand about politics in the wizarding world. I am a Light Lord, as well as the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and you cannot simply command me.”

“I warned you,” said Harry quietly, and awoke the snake that lived in his magic.

He hated doing it, but the hatred did not keep him from opening the snake’s jaws and beginning to eat Dumbledore’s magic, any more than his sorrow and rage last year had kept him from pinning Connor to the wall when he crossed a certain line. This had to be done. Dumbledore would never believe him in earnest if Harry did not back up his threats. And the one good thing about doing this was that Harry spared anyone else from having to make the same decision.

Lily had often told him that what set Dumbledore apart from other wizards was his capacity for making the hard choices, the ones that other people would dither over until it was too late. Harry would have to be able to make them, too.

*And it is harder than I ever believed it was, away from the comforting security of knowing what my place is in the world, and knowing that there’s an absolute good in protecting Connor and fighting the Dark Lord. I have to judge what’s good and what’s evil on my own, now, and there is so much chance of making a mistake.*

*So I’ll decide, and if I make mistakes, I will face them.*

Dumbledore’s power washed towards him, and poured smoothly down the snake’s throat. Harry had done this once before, though then he hadn’t realized what he was doing; he had simply ripped and torn at Dumbledore’s magic, seizing it indiscriminately. Now, he had learned a bit better, and directed the snake to eat the compulsion on the witnesses. Witches and wizards stirred and began to buzz as the snake steadily swallowed more and more.

This power, unlike that which he had stolen from Voldemort and the Death Eaters last year, did not make Harry ill. It was the magic of a man who had dedicated his life to Light, after all, no matter how much he had slipped up in these last years. Harry therefore did not vomit it back up, or need to use it for something else immediately. He made it part of himself, pressing the alien power into his own until they blended seamlessly together.

The raw power pouring from his body grew stronger and stronger, strong enough to sing in his ears, and Draco gave a drunken little giggle behind him and whispered, “Your magic smells like roses.”

*Odd,* Harry thought, but then could pay it no mind as Dumbledore began to fight back.

The magic glimmering around the Headmaster formed into a vortex and headed straight for Harry. He didn’t know if it was the result of a spell or a specific gift of Dumbledore’s, and he had no time to find out. He lifted a hand, and his wandless magic poured easily through his skin and formed a Harry-shaped barrier that extended out and in front of him. The vortex met it, and both it and the barrier shimmered and vanished as though they were mist burned away on a summer morning.
Harry lifted his head with difficulty, and fixed his eyes on Dumbledore’s. The snake hissed, wanting to eat more of the Headmaster’s magic, but Harry restrained it. He had made his point, from the terror behind the mask of calmness on Dumbledore’s face.

Besides, he’d eaten enough that he would really hate to absorb more, at this point. He felt top-heavy. It would take him some time to become accustomed to the new weight of power.

“I can stop now,” he said quietly, though he knew Dumbledore would hear every word, even under the excited, confused buzz coming from behind him. “You have two choices, Headmaster. Oppose me, and you’ll lose more of your power. Yield to me, and you at least have a chance of getting out of here with some of your magic intact.” He forced his lips to move into a smile. “I promise nothing about your dignity.”

Dumbledore continued staring for a long moment. Harry could all but feel his mind racing, as though he had swallowed some of his thoughts, too. There were other plans he could make. There must be other plans he could make. Dumbledore was used to fighting back, through war after war when it must have seemed as though the Dark would win. Normally, nothing could stop him. There must be some third option he could find, some way out of the tight bargain Harry proposed.

Perhaps, if he had had more time or hadn’t been in front of a crowd of staring outsiders, including his own outraged Deputy Headmistress, Dumbledore might have found a way. As it was, he bowed his head, once, his eyes still glimmering with battle-readiness. “Ask your questions, then,” he said.

Harry nodded, once, and put the snake to sleep. “Why did you leave holes in the outer wards?”

“I did not know they were there until I began to inspect them after you captured Rabastan Lestrange.” Dumbledore was trying hard to make it sound as though this were not his fault, but his voice was not as melodic and reassuring as usual; Harry had stripped him down to near bone, and it showed. “Then, yes, I found many small holes that Mulciber must have worked to expand into larger tears, and others that had not registered as holes, but as doorways opened by professors keyed to the wards. Those are ordinary occurrences, as when Professor Snape wishes to bring in potions ingredients that the protective spells in the wards might object to. Normally they are closed at once. That did not happen this time.”

“And you did not sense it?” Harry demanded. He had to raise his voice slightly as the voices of the witnesses turned into shouts of anger and disbelief. “You did not close the doorways when they didn’t shut on their own?”

“I did not pay as much attention to them as I should have,” Dumbledore admitted. “I was concentrating on the inside of the school, and I can only spend so much time in contact with the wards before I must retreat and rest. That is why the professors are keyed to the wards in the first place,” he added, obviously trying to regain some face. “They are responsible for making sure they shut the doors they open, rather than leaving such duties entirely up to the Headmaster.”

“Rather hard for them to remember it, when a Death Eater is using Unforgivable Curses on them. Why did you pay more attention to the inner wards, at the expense of the outer?” Harry heard at least some people muttering in confusion about the Death Eater and the Unforgivable Curses, but he would make them understand in a moment. For now, he wanted to hear the reasons from Dumbledore’s own mouth. Mulciber would have said anything to save his life. He could have been lying.

“I was watching matters inside the school,” Dumbledore began.

“Spying,” said Harry coolly, and heard several outraged gasps.

“I was watching,” Dumbledore corrected him, tone going frosty. Harry suspected they were near the limit of how much he could push the Headmaster without backing up another threat. “I wanted to be sure that the students inside the school were safe. Matters are delicate in the time of the Tournament; it’s not unknown for students from different schools to develop intense rivalries, when they are quartered so close together. And, of course, when we have a fourth-year student with the power of a Lord walking about, it pays to keep a close eye on him.”

A few gasps trod on Dumbledore’s announcement. Harry wondered if it came from his admission, or if there were some people who had not believed that Harry’s power was Lord-level until Dumbledore confirmed it.

He will turn this back against me if he can. I must not let him.
“You devoted so much attention to the inner wards that you neglected the outer ones,” Harry summed up. “It was negligence, and not malice.”

Dumbledore obviously wanted to find something to say against that, but with Harry cutting down the options to two—negligence or malice—he must have realized that a denial would make it seem as if he had done it on purpose. The best he could do was say, “Yes. I should have paid more attention.”

Harry shook his head. “Do you think, Headmaster, that you deserve to remain in charge of a school where you care more about watching the students than the students’ enemies?”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened. Harry simply stared at him. He did not know if he could get Dumbledore actually backed out of the Headmaster position—he suspected not, not when the admission was negligence and not malice—but if he made one broad threat, then he could look compassionate and humane when he put restrictions on Dumbledore instead.

Yes, I can look that way. And I make myself sick with these lies. Of course, I don’t like being honest, either. I wish that I could sit in a corner and not have to speak at all. I wish everyone would leave me the hell alone and not pay attention to me.

Someone moved at the edge of the crowd behind Dumbledore, where McGonagall still stood with the ward coiled around her feet. A moment later, Lucius Malfoy was bowing with poise Harry had never seen from him, his voice helpful and solicitous.

“Forgive me for interrupting, Mr. Potter, Headmaster Dumbledore,” he said, “but I came to witness the Second Task. I sit on Hogwarts’ Board of Governors, and I considered it my duty. Mr. Potter, I am sure that the other members of the Board could be called together, if it is deemed necessary. Most of them are deeply concerned with the school’s safety, as their own children—and my own son—live here ten months out of the year. We could hold a vote. The Governors, voting unanimously, can sack the Headmaster.”

Harry met Lucius’s eyes for a moment, and saw a chill gleam of amusement dart out of them. He was playing the game, then, and would follow where it led. He would not push for Dumbledore’s sacking if it proved impossible, but he had added a new pressure, to show that the Headmaster had more opponents than one child.

“I made a mistake,” Dumbledore was saying now. Harry felt his power briefly flex, as if he were about to throw it over the minds in the room or add it to his voice, and then he obviously remembered what Harry had done to him the last time he compelled people. His magic settled back down again. “I must confess, I am old and sometimes do not think as closely about things as I should, but I would never willingly endanger Hogwarts.” Harry could hear the ring of sincerity in his voice, and knew that that alone, along with Dumbledore’s reputation, would convince a great many of those watching. “It was the result of carelessness on my part, and not malice. I have already admitted that. I do not see that I should be sacked for a mistake.”

Harry lifted his head consideringly, and glanced at Lucius. “Hmm. What do you think, Mr. Malfoy? Is the Headmaster of Hogwarts allowed mistakes?”

Lucius curled his lip to hide laughter, but gave a judicious nod. “I think so. He is only human.” That would strike a blow against Dumbledore’s invincibility in some of the listeners’ minds, Harry knew. “I am sure the other governors will agree.” That would mean Lucius was not sure of persuading everyone else to vote against Dumbledore, Harry knew. “But what are we to do to make sure Hogwarts is safe? I would not leave my son in a school where Death Eaters can intrude at will.” There could be no doubt that Lucius was laughing on those last words, not if one knew him.

“The Headmaster has many burdens to bear,” said Harry. “He has already admitted that. Perhaps some help?” He faced McGonagall, and saw her eyes slowly widen as she realized what he would ask of her. “Professor McGonagall, you are Deputy Headmistress. The wards seem to like you. Would you object to being more keyed into the wards? Perhaps bearing some of the burdens that Headmaster Dumbledore now carries all alone?”

McGonagall slowly inclined her head.

“Minerva has many tasks of her own,” said Dumbledore, now attempting a jovial tone. “She is Transfiguration professor, and the Head of Gryffindor House. Would you make her busier yet, Mr. Potter?”

“I am willing, Albus,” said McGonagall firmly. “I should not have left it this long, truly.” She drew nearer the Headmaster and patted his arm tenderly. Harry could not help but be impressed, to see any Gryffindor act so well in the face of open stares. “I should have sensed what you were struggling through and helped you before this. I am sorry for my own
Dumbledore’s face reflected his inner struggle, but in the end, as Harry had known he would, he had no choice but to give in gracefully. Admitting he had made a mistake was one thing, refusing help for it another. He nodded and said, “I will key Minerva to some of the wards. I swear it by Merlin and my magic.”

Harry lifted his head. “Now, Headmaster, will you still find it necessary to watch the students inside more than the enemies outside?”

Dumbledore looked at him, narrow-eyed. Harry looked back. In some ways, of course, their respective positions were absolutely ridiculous: a fourteen-year-old boy chiding a wizard over a hundred and fifty years old, the defeater of Grindelwald, a Light Lord and Headmaster respected by thousands. But Harry knew—had realized, in a way he had not, before—that strength of magical power was a trump card to nearly everything else. He might not be able to demand that Dumbledore step down as Headmaster of Hogwarts, but he could demand some consideration from him. And Dumbledore would have to listen. Harry’s right to demand this much was in every breath of the magic that radiated from him.

I hate it.

Harry shoved the thought away. There was no time for it right now.

“I will not,” Dumbledore said at last, “I am certain, if I have someone at my side to share the burden.”

Harry nodded. “And now, Headmaster, about the Death Eater roaming the halls—”

“What is this?”

Harry turned his head, and caught Rita Skeeter’s eye through those enormous glasses she wore. He stifled the temptation to shake his head. She had her quill hovering above her notebook, poised to take down whatever he said.

“Professor Moody, hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts at the beginning of the year,” said Harry, his voice as steady as he could make it, “turned out to be the Death Eater Mulciber, one of Voldemort’s servants, who escaped from Azkaban last year.” He ignored the gasps and flinches when he mentioned Voldemort’s name. Possibly he could have been more diplomatic and used one of the evasive titles instead, but he hadn’t thought of it, and he wouldn’t change it now, which would make him look weak. “He was the one who helped Rabastan Lestrange get through the wards, and used Imperius on various professors to bespell them into creating still more holes in the wards. Then he used Obliviate to make them forget what they’d done.”

“Where is he now?” asked Skeeter, her voice trembling with something Harry suspected was eagerness. He wondered if she would have tried to track down Mulciber and interview him, if he was still alive.

“He is dead,” said Harry quietly. Gasps sounded around him. “He faced me in the hospital wing and tried to make me a bargain for his freedom and life, bragging all the while that the Headmaster had not the least idea of what he’d done. I made a collar he wore to protect his mind explode, and the explosion killed him.”

Some of the members of the audience edged backward, and Harry understood that, too. If this was going to be utterly in the public eye, then his own reputation would suffer along with Dumbledore’s. This was why it would take some time to move Dumbledore out of the Headmaster’s position. Some governors were likely to vote for him to stay not out of approval of his actions and motives, but out of distrust of Harry’s.

“So we have only your word for it, then,” said someone from the side. Harry glanced towards her, and made out the eager brown eyes of yet another witch holding a notebook. This was probably one of Rita’s rivals, he thought, perhaps even another reporter for the Prophet itself.

“I was there,” said Snape softly, his hand tightening on Harry’s left shoulder. “I can confirm his story, and both of us would be willing to testify under Veritaserum.”

“But aren’t you Professor Snape?” asked the woman, her quill scribbling away furiously in her notebook. “The boy’s guardian? I don’t think that you would have an unbiased view of the matter.”
“Show me someone who has an unbiased view of Death Eaters who hold them under the Imperius Curse, madam,” said Snape, his voice growing extremely dry.

She blinked at him, obviously uncertain.

“Headmaster,” said Harry, before they could wander too far afield. “I want to know why you never sensed Mulciber’s deception.”

“The collar,” said Dumbledore at once. “The Hounds in the Ministry wore similar collars. When they were removed, they nearly killed them. I did not wish to harm Professor Moody. I had no reason to doubt that he was the real man, as he had picked up odd habits in his old age and his paranoia. I believed the collar to be merely another of them.”

Harry nodded. It was the answer he had anticipated Dumbledore would give. “And you picked up nothing strange about him in all your spying through the inner wards?”

Dumbledore winced and gave him a helpless glare. Then he said, “No.”

“So perhaps watching through the inner wards is not as profitable as you deemed it to be, then?” Harry pressed. “Perhaps it should stop?”

There came a sharp inclination of Dumbledore’s head. He would have said something different if they were not in front of an audience, Harry thought. But then, everything would have happened differently if they were not in public.

“Good. I’ll hold you to that, Headmaster.” Harry pressed onto another subject. “And why did you not inform me about my name being placed in the Goblet of Fire? Didn’t it concern you that someone submitted my name?”

“No,” said Dumbledore quietly. “You are the most powerful student in the school, my dear boy.” The word student was stressed just slightly. “It is not unusual that someone should be convinced that you would win if they submitted your name. The competition between the three schools has always been intense. If you could win the Tournament, you would bring honor and glory to Hogwarts.” He paused, his eyes challenging. “But the Goblet chose your twin instead.”

“Yes, it did,” said Harry. He wondered if he should reveal that it had been Dumbledore who had made sure of that.

A movement off to the side caught his eye. He turned his head, and James was there, standing on the edge of the crowd where Lucius had been, his face helpless.

He came.

Harry swallowed. Explain Connor’s name in the Goblet, and then he would have to explain why Dumbledore was so insistent that his twin compete, and that would lead to the reasons he had for wanting to control Harry, and that would lead to the whole mess of Lily and James and Harry’s home life and his training.

He held the power to destroy both Dumbledore and his father right now, not to mention Lily. Child abuse was a taint that would stick and stink, not a mistake to be excused with a claim of an old man’s forgetful memory. Harry had seen reports of child abuse trials dragged on for months and months in the Daily Prophet, and even in cases where the allegations turned out to come from a misunderstanding, a reek clung to the names of the parents involved forever after.

He would drive Dumbledore and his parents from any semblance of a normal life if he revealed the truth now. That would alienate James, permanently, just when he was making some kind of gesture of reconciliation. It would turn Dumbledore into the kind of man Mulciber had been in the last moments of his life, with nothing else to lose, and no reason to hold back on doing the utmost evil he could.

And it would bring him into contact with Lily again, and hurt her when Harry only wanted to be done with her. And it would all but ruin Connor’s life, at a time when he was still under the stress of the Tournament.

And it would have everyone staring at him. It would convince most people that he was a victim, that he was deserving of pity.

Neither Harry nor his allies could afford that, at this juncture when he had to be strong. Harry himself did not think he could
take it. He never wanted anyone to think him weak, that he was in some need of comfort or coddling.

Harry turned away from that poison, and said only, “And the web on the merfolk, Headmaster? I could see it coiling when I was under the lake. Something was happening. The merfolk barely interfered with the Champions when they came to rescue their prized people. Why?”

Dumbledore sighed and closed his eyes. “The webs and spells which keep us safe from the merfolk,” he whispered, “are three-cornered. One is linked to the selkies of Britain, one to the merrows of Ireland, and one to the sirens of Greece, as they are the three most vicious tribes of their kind, and the three most likely to harm humans.” He opened his eyes again. “One of the webs has been torn free from its anchor. From the immense distance involved, I would say that the sirens of Greece are free, and that they have become part of Lord Voldemort’s armies.”

Harry shivered. He closed his eyes as shouts and loud denials exploded around him—wizards denying everything from Voldemort still being alive to sirens being of any good to anyone, since all they wanted to do was sing and enchant humans.

They are Dark creatures, then. Their voices compel people. No wonder I was hearing the Dark music sing under the lake water.

Voldemort does have the power to destroy a web. He can’t manage most spells without a wand, but if he simply sent raw power flowing at something... who knows what he could accomplish? Or perhaps he possessed someone else and lent them magic enough to break the spell.

I wonder why I didn’t dream of this? Then Harry grimaced as he remembered the sleeping enchantment McGonagall had put on him. Perhaps the vision did try to come, but it couldn’t get through the barrier of that spell.

“I believe the webs on the selkies and the merrows should hold,” Dumbledore was saying, when Harry opened his eyes again. “They have been destabilized, but not completely torn. They will hold firm. That is, as long as no one interferes with them.” He gave Harry a warning glance.

Harry stared steadily back at him. He hardly intended to dash out to the lake and free the merpeople there. He had no idea how they would act once they were free; at least he had made sure the Dementors could harm no one, and the unicorns were creatures of Light who never would. He knew so little about merfolk that he would have to study them before he decided what to do about the webs.

He looked around the room, and realized that the news of the sirens’ freedom and Voldemort’s return had put a stop to the questioning. Most people looked ill. They wanted to go away and chew on everything they had heard. Skeeter was already gone, and so was her brown-eyed rival, presumably to write up their articles.

“Can I trust you to keep honest?” Harry asked Dumbledore. “To accept restrictions on your use of the wards, and Professor McGonagall’s being keyed into more of them? To not use compulsion any more?” He let the snake flex around him, reminding Dumbledore of what would happen if he did not comply.

Dumbledore bowed his head, slowly, proudly.

“He will have me to keep him honest, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, sliding an arm through Dumbledore’s. “I will make sure of it.” Her eyes met his, still angry.

Harry nodded to her, and turned on his heel. He could see James coming towards him, but he couldn’t spare the time to deal with his father just yet. There was someone else who needed his help.

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“But what makes you think that Moody is still alive?” Draco complained, then ducked as Harry lost patience with the locking spells on Mulciber’s door and simply blasted the damn thing open. Harry collected the splinters of wood as they tried to fly into the hall, and shifted them into a pile on the floor. Snape stepped up beside him, wand drawn, though he relaxed when they found themselves looking into a fairly normal room. Harry hadn’t thought that Mulciber would have any Dark artifacts lying about anyway—the possibility of discovery was too great—but the delicate wooden tables, silvery carpeting, and large bed seemed too innocent.
His gaze drifted over and fixed on a large trunk at the foot of the bed. It had enough locks on it to qualify it as suspicious. He strode towards it, while behind him Snape lectured Draco.

“Mulciber was using Polyjuice to resemble Moody, Draco. What have you learned about Polyjuice?”

“That it takes a month to brew,” said Draco, sounding confused. “That it requires hair from a living subject, though the—“ He paused. “Oh.”

“Oh indeed,” said Snape, and then came up beside Harry, who was studying the locks. “Perhaps you are looking for these, Harry?”

Harry glanced up as Snape handed him a bunch of keys. He blinked. “Where did you get these?”

Snape nodded at one of the wooden tables. “There, under a Disillusionment Charm.” He raised his eyebrows. “You did not notice the Charm?”

Harry felt his cheeks heat up, and shook his head. He was simply moving too fast, running on too much adrenaline. He sighed, murmured, “Thanks,” and fitted the first key into the first lock.

That revealed a bunch of books, but unless Mulciber had Transfigured Moody—and Harry did not think he had, as he would have to have hair for the Polyjuice—he wasn’t there. Harry shut the trunk lid, as it was the only way he could fit the second key into the lock, and this time revealed a goodly number of quills, pieces of what looked like a smashed Foe-Glass, and a subtle shimmer that proved to be an Invisibility Cloak when he thrust his hands into it.

Harry shut the lock with a shake of his head, then tried the last key on the ring, and the last lock on the trunk. This opened into a chamber that seemed to spiral straight down into the middle of the floor, though really, Harry knew, it led into the middle of the trunk. He had started to set one foot on the series of steps curving along the stone wall when Snape seized his arm.

“Where do you think you are going?” he hissed in Harry’s ear.

Harry stared at him, then stepped out of the way while Snape cast several sensing spells on the stairs to reveal any traps. He rubbed his face. He could have done that if he’d thought of it. He just wasn’t thinking. His entire body seemed to be twitching, consumed by the need to move, to do things.

He jumped when a hand came to rest in the middle of his back. He relaxed, however, when it started to rub. “Hush,” Draco whispered to him. “It’s all right.”

Harry wanted to say it wasn’t, but he could feel the hand relaxing him, and he nodded and waited in forced patience while Snape finally, grudgingly, conceded that Harry could go down the steps, as long as both Draco and Snape followed him.

They descended into a stone room that would have fit seamlessly into one of the dungeons at Hogwarts, and was equally bare of decoration. On the floor, senseless, lay a thin and heavily scarred man, half-naked. Harry winced at the sight of him. His hair was ragged from multiple cuts, and his ribs stood out under his skin, and he was covered with bruises and minus his wooden leg and magical eye, but there was no doubt that this was Moody.

Harry knelt down beside him and shook him gently, ready to jump out of the way if he struck; it wasn’t a good idea to wake a trained Auror too suddenly. However, Moody’s eyes slid open to reveal a glazed expression, and Harry nodded. He’d guessed that the man would be under the Imperius Curse. Mulciber wasn’t one to leave a dangerous opponent lying around without it.

“Finite Incantatem,” Harry whispered, and his magic surged out and wiped the Curse from Moody’s mind. Moody blinked his one eye at him, then abruptly growled and reached for a wand that, of course, wasn’t there. Harry made a mental note to find it.

“How bloody hell are you?” was the first thing the real Moody said to him.

Harry smiled in spite of himself. “Someone come to rescue you, sir,” he said. “You’ve spent months at the bottom of a trunk that I guess you own. Mulciber, one of the escaped Death Eaters, impersonated you and used your hair for Polyjuice Potion.
I’d guess he kept you under Imperius most of the time.”

Moody reached up and felt at his hair, then grunted, seeming to accept the truth of Harry’s story. For all his mistreatment, he sat up with an agility that impressed Harry, and scanned the bottom of the trunk. He dismissed Draco, but his eye locked onto Snape, and he issued a low growl. “Death Eater bastard,” he said.

“Moody.” Snape didn’t sound best pleased, and he kept hold of his wand as though he were about to use it the same way he had on Rabastan. Harry made a mental note to find out what that spell that had so unnerved the Death Eater had been. “You know full well that I was part of the Order of the Phoenix, and that I spied on Dumbledore’s orders.” He paused, then added delicately, “Though no longer.”

Moody laughed, a sound that reminded Harry of one of Sirius’s bark-like chuckles. He held out an arm, and Harry supported him without further question, holding him upright as he swayed on his one leg. “Who do you serve now, Snape? Changed your mind and decided to go crawling back to Voldemort?”

“No,” said Snape. “I walk at Harry Potter’s side. The boy who rescued you, Moody.”

Moody turned his eye sharply back on Harry. “I did ask who the bloody hell you were,” he said, as if it were Harry’s fault for not telling him earlier. “Potter, eh? I know your father, and I remember reading you about in the Prophet before—all this happened.” He grimaced as if he’d bitten into something foul. “Where’s Mulciber, anyway?”

“You killed him,” Snape elaborated, ignoring Harry’s glare effortlessly.

“Only because I had no choice,” said Harry. “Can you walk, sir? I’m sure that your wooden leg and your magical eye can’t be far away. We’ll get you out of here and reunited with them, and then you should go to St. Mungo’s, I think. They can treat you there.”

“Dead,” said Harry quietly.

Moody paused a moment before he turned his head back to Harry, as if he’d been waiting for his magical eye to look at him first. “I bloody hate having a blind spot,” he said. “You killed a fully-trained wizard? A Death Eater?”

Harry jumped in shock, though he couldn’t do much of that when he was under the weight of Moody’s arm. Luckily, Snape and Draco had both pivoted already to point their wands at the two women who’d descended the stairs. Harry wondered if he should be reassured or not that he recognized both: Auror Mallory and Tonks.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, ignoring Moody’s muttering about his secret room becoming a “blasted parade ground.”

“The Minister is here,” said Mallory. “So of course we came along. The reports of Death Eaters at Hogwarts have reached us by now.” She bared her teeth a bit. “I regret to say that I can’t do it myself all the time, since I am the Head of the Auror Office now, but the Minister’s decided that there need to be Aurors in Hogwarts. A rotating guard of, say, five should be sufficient.”

Harry blinked his eyes. “And you’ll take Moody and Lestrange?” he asked.

“The Minister is here,” said Mallory. “Of course.” Mallory bowed to Moody. “Auror Moody is an old and valued comrade. And we should have Lestrange anyway, for questioning. We should have had him from the beginning.” She gave Snape a mildly disapproving glance. Snape ignored that, too, focusing on something that he looked far more interested in.

“What has the Headmaster to say about Aurors in his school?” he asked.

“He isn’t being given a choice,” said Mallory. “The Minister’s assigning them, and his authority to assign the Aurors to such guard positions overpowers the Headmaster’s right to object. Besides, who can object to guardians who will add to the children’s sense of safety? I’m sure most parents will be in favor of the move.” She had a self-satisfied look, Harry realized, and he doubted that it was a coincidence Scrimgeour had chosen her to head the Auror Office.
“Indeed.” Snape resembled Auror Mallory more than a touch in that moment. Harry let out a cautious breath of relief. He still needed to speak with Snape, that much was plain, but perhaps his guardian would be satisfied with this form of revenge and not go against Dumbledore.

“I assume the Minister wants to speak with me?” Harry asked.

Mallory nodded, and moved over to assist with Moody. Tonks, her hair bright green, started forward to help, but tripped over her own feet, so Mallory sent her up the stairs to find Moody’s wand. “He wants to ask you some questions about Mulciber’s death, Potter, and how Lestrange intruded.”

Harry wiped at his eyes. Scrimgeour, James, Snape…then I can go off by myself and think about this. “Of course.”

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As it turned out, the interview with Scrimgeour was mercifully short. He asked a few pointed, penetrating questions that Harry suspected came from Auror interrogations, then pronounced Mulciber’s death a clear case of self-defense. He would have to speak with Amelia Bones, still the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but he didn’t think she would demand a trial. Harry sagged in relief.

The only remotely worrying thing the Minister said came as he was leaving. He said, his eyes studying Harry’s, or perhaps the lightning bolt scar on his forehead, “I think I told you once that I had an ability to sense Dark magic, by virtue of using only Light spells all my life.”

Harry nodded.

“I sensed an enormous explosion of Dark magic here on Christmas night,” said Scrimgeour quietly. “It must have been powerful indeed, for me to receive so many echoes in London. Would you care to explain what that was about, Mr. Potter?”

Harry swallowed. “No one died, Minister. One person was hurt, but Madam Pomfrey healed her.”

“No one died,” Scrimgeour said. “But I think you are wrong about only one person being hurt, Mr. Potter.” He paused a moment, as if debating, then said, “The Ministry keeps records of travel through the Floo network, you know. There was one name on the list of arrivals at Hogwarts on Christmas Eve that caught my eye. Lily Potter.” He looked hard at Harry. “Could that have something to do with it, do you think?”

“She’s resting at our old house in Godric’s Hollow,” said Harry, his own voice sounding hollow and mechanical to his ears. “You could go visit her if you like. I’m sure that she would tell you she was fine.” She would, Harry knew. Lily and Dumbledore would hardly admit what had really happened that night to anyone; it would ruin them as well as Harry.

“I’m sure,” said Scrimgeour. “But she made you powerfully angry, Mr. Potter. And given that, and what you said at your guardian’s trial only a few days before, I have been turning certain things over in my mind. Piecing the evidence together, you might say.”

Shit. Harry had confessed to not feeling safe with his parents at Snape’s trial. He kept his face as bland as possible. “I hope that you catch the perpetrator, Minister,” he said.

Scrimgeour smiled. It was a faint expression, with his lips pressed together, and as dangerous as a mouthful of teeth. “I’m sure I’ll run them to ground eventually. Good day, Mr. Potter.” He turned and swept out of the Great Hall, trailing several Aurors who’d come along behind him. Moody and Rabastan floated in their midst on conjured stretchers, as did Mulciber’s body. Mallory remained, with Tonks, assigning some others to guard positions.

Harry stood where he was for a few moments, calming his breathing. Then he turned. James would be up in the hospital wing, with Connor.

“What did he mean, Harry?” That was Draco’s voice, low in his ear. “You’re radiating panic hard enough to—“ He paused. “Do you think that he knows about your parents?”

“It’s not that I’m afraid of that,” Harry whispered back. “But I’m afraid of what he might do with the knowledge.” And he was. Scrimgeour was relentless—patient, but relentless. Harry did not want to think what would happen if he brought James
and Lily up on charges.

The only thing that Harry couldn’t figure out was why Scrimgeour would expend the effort. He was Minister now, with dozens of more important tasks occupying his mind. He and Harry had done each other favors in the past, but this would be something more than a favor. He would probably put other investigators on the case instead, Harry concluded, and they would be unlikely to find as much. He made himself stop worrying about it.

“He would do only good things, I am certain.”

Harry abruptly turned. Perhaps I should have my conversation with Snape now. Most of the spectators had left the Great Hall before his conversation with Scrimgeour, hurrying home to spread the news by firecall or owl post, and many others had been herded away by the Aurors. Not too many people would be around to see him and Snape talking.

“Sir,” he said, “I think there are some things you should understand.”

Snape’s eyes widened minutely, but he nodded. “I am listening, Harry.”

Harry glanced at Draco. “Do you want to tell him about what you gained, or should I?”

Draco gave him a dirty look, but nodded and stood a bit taller. “Sir, I’m an empath now,” he said. “Julia Malfoy, whose ghost I summoned on Halloween, gave me that gift. I’m a Malfoy magical heir now.” He smiled. “My father will wait at least a year to be certain about it, but he’ll introduce me as his own heir soon.”

Snape nodded, face shadowed. “Congratulations, Draco. I fail to see why Harry would wish me to know this, however.”

“Because Draco is aware of my emotions,” said Harry. “That means that I accept I can’t hide from him, and I trust him with more of myself than anyone else.” Draco sidled a step closer to him. Harry couldn’t feel emotions himself, but was fairly sure that Draco would be radiating delight. “And I know he loves me, too.” His voice still cracked when he spoke the words aloud. He determined to ignore it. “What I say to him, or what he says of me, is the truth. I know that we haven’t been very close since you came back from your trial. I would like to be able to trust you again, the way I trust Draco. For that to happen, you’ll need to stop planning revenge on my parents and Dumbledore.”

Snape stilled. Then he said, “May I ask why?”

“Because I don’t want anything to happen just because of what they did to me,” said Harry. “Never again. That period of my life is closed. And if—” Merlin, this is hard. I hate honesty. “I do want a parent, you’re my best choice, but I can’t have you planning revenge on all and sundry. I can’t trust you if I think that you’re going to hurt me by making me relive my past at any moment.” He took a deep breath, and met Snape’s eyes. “I want to stay with you this summer. I want to have a proper guardian, not just in a legal sense, or just one who’s opposed to my parents. I need to know that I really am more important to you than your grudge against James.”

Snape made a low sound. “Of course you are, Harry.”

“But it doesn’t feel like that.” Harry moved a step forward, and felt Draco lean fully against him, arms falling to clasp together around his waist. He resisted the urge to wriggle out of the hold. “Please, Professor Snape. Promise me that you won’t seek revenge against them.”

Snape dropped to one knee. “They deserve justice for what they did to you, Harry,” he said quietly. “And I fear that you will never heal until they receive that justice.”

“I am healing,” Harry objected. “Draco won’t let me be anything but honest with him now. And I can heal even more with two people I can be honest with, as long as I know that you aren’t doing something I really, really don’t want you to do.”

Snape sighed, a sigh that seemed to drag out most of his grief and set it hovering in the air between them. “This matters that much to you, Harry?”

“It does.” Harry feared what Scrimgeour would do if he discovered the truth about his parents, but he feared more where and how Snape would strike if he kept running this path of vengeance. Scrimgeour was at least scrupulously loyal to the law. With him, it would be a trial. With Snape, it could well be torture. Harry had seen how close his guardian’s Death Eater side
sometimes was to the surface. He did not want to encourage it—for Snape’s sake as well as his own and his parents’ and Connor’s.

“I promise.”

Harry blinked. He’d been so caught up in his thoughts that he had barely heard the whisper. “What?”

“I promise,” said Snape. “So long as you are in need of healing and safety and a guardian first and foremost, Harry, I swear that I shall do my best to protect you. In the name of Merlin, you are more important to me than a stupid grudge from my schooldays.” He paused, and seemed to be fumbling for words. “It will be hard to be civil around your parents or the Headmaster, but I promise that I will not hurt them.”

Harry stepped forward, pulling gently away from Draco, and put a hand on Snape’s shoulder. He didn’t want to force him into a public embrace right now. “Thank you. That was what I wanted to hear.”

And he did believe Snape. His own shoulders felt lighter, and the thought of dealing with his father in the hospital wing was no longer so terrible.

“Do come talk to me soon,” Snape murmured as he clasped Harry’s hand. “I would like to hear about Draco’s empathy, and—much of the rest of it.”

Harry nodded to him. “I will.” Then he turned and made for the hospital wing. Halfway there, he noticed Draco walking beside him. He gave him a strange glance.

Draco gave him another one back, as though to say Harry had been stupid to think he’d let him go anywhere alone.

Harry rolled his eyes and continued climbing the stairs. He just hoped Draco didn’t make his conversation with James any harder than it had to be.

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James started up anxiously from beside Connor’s bed when Harry entered. He came a step forward, then stopped when Draco followed and looped his arms possessively around Harry’s waist again. Harry couldn’t help a fretful wriggle this time, since this felt too good and he didn’t like the temptation to lean back against Draco, but the arms stayed in place.

“I promise I’ll be good,” Draco whispered coaxingly, and Harry gave in. To have Draco behave was well worth the potential discomfort. He raised his eyes to his father’s.

“I was watching the Second Task,” James whispered. “I—decided I should come and see it, since my sons were in it. But I couldn’t see clearly when Connor was injured, and then I had no idea what was happening until after you came back to the Great Hall.” He let out a sharp breath and glanced over his shoulder at the hospital bed. “Lestrange could have killed him.”

“He almost did,” said Harry. “I’m only going to ask you this once. Did you know anything about Lily and Dumbledore’s plan on Christmas night?”

James shook his head. “No. I—Lily sent me a letter telling me about it, in detail, afterward. But I swear to you, Harry, in the name of the sunrise our ancestors came from, I didn’t know.” His eyes, large and too dark in his pale face, met Harry’s entreatingly.

Harry nodded, slowly. “And are you going to be a pain in the arse about Professor Snape being my guardian, or not?”

James said nothing for a long time. Draco muttered something inaudible, but Harry nudged him, and he shut up. Harry didn’t think his father was refusing. He was thinking, and sometimes, that took him a long time.

James turned to look back at the bed again, then at Harry.

“I saw what you did today,” he said. “And I—I don’t think I can object any more, Harry. There’s no point in trying to rebuild the kind of relationship we had when you were a child.” Draco muttered something else, but James didn’t pay any attention, and Harry forced himself not to. “You’re a young man, not a child, and while I’d still like to be part of your life, I can’t
replace what Snape is to you.”

“What about Connor?” Harry asked.

“He’ll have to decide for himself.” James paused, then said, “I was going to suggest in my next letter that you two consider coming to Lux Aeterna for the Easter holidays, but I don’t know how well he’ll take it. He said—he wrote me a letter yesterday that—” James shook his head and broke off.

“He will have to decide for himself,” said Harry, unsure how well Connor’s decision to forsake his parents would stand up in the face of this subdued, quiet James. “So will I, for that matter.”

James nodded. “What do you want from me right now, Harry?”

Harry had to study James in silence before he could say anything. James looked sincere enough now, but he’d looked like that before, at the end of last year, and that hadn’t turned out to mean anything. Harry had no obligation to give him a second chance. After what he’d done, bringing charges against Snape and then sending only silence, and then the Pensieve, and then the sharp letters, Harry knew that most people would think him totally justified in throwing his father over.

But he’d trusted Snape when he said that he would change, and he did not truly think James could be trusted less than Snape, altogether. Harry certainly had less trust in him at this moment, but he trusted no one with much except Draco.

*I could do worse than to set limits.*

“I want you to go home,” said Harry. “I want you to write letters to me that actually talk about you, and what you’re doing, rather than trying to convince me to abandon Snape. I don’t want you to come and visit me unless I specifically invite you. I don’t want you to mention the Easter holidays again, or press me about them, and I don’t want you to mention Snape at all.”

James nodded. “I can do that.”

He didn’t ask for more, didn’t press, and Harry marked that down, carefully, as one possible difference between him and the old James.

“Connor will have to make his own decisions,” he said. “But if I find out that you’re trying to use or pressure him in any way, then that’s the end. I’ll cut off all contact between us.”

“I understand,” said James.

He didn’t make another move, didn’t say another word, just continued to gaze at Harry beseechingly. Harry wondered what he wanted from him. There was no way that they could have anything normal.

In the end, Harry didn’t want to try that, either. He didn’t have anything else to say to this man whom only blood connected him to.

He turned and walked calmly out of the room, his pace forcing Draco to loosen his hold around his waist. Behind him, he heard James move to resume his place at Connor’s bedside.

Harry would have thought about staying, too, but he didn’t want to stand in awkward silence with James, and Madam Pomfrey had assured him that Connor wouldn’t awaken before the morning, anyway; she’d put him under strong sleeping charms to give the healing magic time to work. He wanted, more than anything else, to go to his room and consider the events of the day and be alone.

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His plan, he quickly discovered, wouldn’t work, and that was because of Draco.

Oh, Draco glared Blaise and Vince out of the room quickly enough, his face telling them that now was not the time to press Harry for the details of any of his exciting adventures. But then, when Harry sat down on his bed and said, “I’m fine, you can go now,” which should have been his cue to leave, Draco sat down beside him instead.
Harry stared hard at him. “I said, I’m fine, and you can go now,” he repeated.

“You didn’t have an ‘and’ in there the first time,” said Draco. “That proves I heard you. And I don’t care, Harry. You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

“I should,” Harry said. He could feel the emotions he’d pushed away waiting to swamp him. He would probably break down, the calm part of his mind noted. He didn’t want anyone seeing that. He wanted to curl up and lick his wounds, and the easiest way to do that was by himself. “I have to think things through.”

“You mean, brood on them.”

Harry shrugged. “There will probably be some of that in there, yes,” he said, and closed his eyes. Mulciber was dying, and the water was filling with blood as Connor caught the Slicing Curse across his abdomen, and Scrimgeour’s yellow eyes were shining thoughtfully as they tracked the path of pieces of information to its logical end.

“You’re forgetting again, Harry,” Draco whispered, as his arms slid one more time around Harry’s waist. “I’m an empath. I felt your emotions earlier. You hate yourself for what you’ve done. You hate all of this, violently—being a leader and putting yourself in the public eye and the attention that’s going to come along with it. And I don’t think that it works for you to bury this and sit on it in silence. It didn’t work with your mother.”

Harry flinched. “Don’t touch me, please,” he said.

Draco let him go at once, but Harry could feel his gaze on the side of his face. He refused to open his eyes. Not only would looking at Draco make things worse, but that wouldn’t allow Harry to see his own visions of what had happened today as clearly. He had to look at them, to categorize the emotions that had come with them and decide how he was going to think of them, so that he could put them away.

“Why not?” Draco asked.

It took Harry a moment to connect the question with his declaration. He hesitated, but Draco had become scarily good at telling when he lied, and anyway, there weren’t many deceptions he could use that Draco would believe. “It feels too good,” he said. “I’m going to—I don’t know, do something like lean against you and cry if you touch me, and I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to be weak,” Harry snapped in exasperation. That much, Draco should have known. Mulciber died behind his eyes, and Harry wondered if there was anything else he could have told them about Voldemort’s plans. That was a reason to regret killing him, but not the strongest one. He had still been a living wizard, capable of changing. Harry still did not see what else he could have done in that situation, but he was determined to think of it with horror, so that he would never use his power casually, the way Dumbledore and Voldemort had done.

“Why not?”

“Will you ask something else?”

“All right,” said Draco, calmly. “Why do you think you’ll be weak if you do something like lean against me and cry? I’ve seen you cry before. I don’t think you’re weak, Harry.”

Harry let out a harsh breath. This will be hard to answer, but if it gets Draco to go away and leave me alone, it’s worth it. “Because this is only the beginning of the war,” he said. “Things like this are going to happen all the time—people getting hurt around me, people dying, me killing people, people staring at me.” People seeing me. I hate that. “I can’t get used to crying about it now, or I’ll never be able to stop. I thought it would be easier than this, because I had the training to prepare me. But it isn’t, and that means that I’m not as strong as I should be yet. So I’m trying to finish the process.”

“Fuck that,” said Draco, his voice rough, and grabbed Harry and dragged him towards him.

Harry struggled for a moment, but then, just as he had been afraid would happen, the warmth crept in around him, and he found that he didn’t really want to move. And oh, Merlin, he was going to do something soppy any moment. And he just couldn’t afford that. He had to make conscious decisions, analyze what he had done, and know his own reasons for his own
actions. He regulated his breathing and refused to let the tears burning behind his eyes fall.

_Why am I crying anyway? I learned a valuable lesson from Mulciber’s death. Connor will live. The Aurors took Lestrange away. Moody was rescued. Snape and Dumbledore and James all know what they have to do now. I have nothing to cry about._

The most satisfactory answer that came to him was exhaustion, but he’d slept deeply under the influence of the sleeping charm, without interruption, until the moment when he awakened under the lake. That couldn’t be it. He hadn’t had anything to eat today. Maybe that was it.

And if Draco would just stop _touching_ him, Harry thought he could hold on. At the moment, Draco had shifted to lean against something, the pillows or one of the bedposts, and tilted so that Harry’s head was tucked in under his chin. He was cradling Harry’s shoulder with one arm, and running his free hand up and down Harry’s back, and it felt incredibly good, and it terrified Harry beyond measure. He tried to curl in on himself, but the position Draco had him in wasn’t a good one for it. He could feel his breath quickening with panic. He didn’t think he could hide anything like this, even the few things he’d managed to conceal successfully from Draco.

_I don’t want someone seeing me. This is stupid. I can’t do this. I’m supposed to be strong, and no matter what I am, a vates or an ally or a leader or a rescuer, that’s true. I can’t be strong like this._

What terrified him the most was that he couldn’t just lash out with his magic and get free of Draco that way. His own reluctance to hurt Draco, and his own shameful desire to stay exactly where he was, got in the way.

“Please,” he whispered. “Please, Draco, let me go.”

“Not this time,” Draco whispered back. “Most of the time, Harry, I would. But sometimes you make the wrong decisions. And this is one of those times.” He rubbed at Harry’s shoulders, making them hunch because his skin was prickling. “I promise you, I’ll be here if you wake or sleep, cry or don’t. I’ll do anything for you right now, except let you go or leave.”

Harry tried to curl in on himself, but he couldn’t. He tried to prevent himself from being seen, and didn’t think he could.

_This is wrong. I can’t have it. It’s only a double-edged dream that’ll slice us both open in the end…_  

And then he realized it didn’t matter anyway, because frustrated, furious tears were already making their way down his face, and he’d shifted so that one of his arms was clutching at Draco with a death grip. Draco didn’t wince, refused to wince, no matter how hard the pressure got.

“I hate this,” Harry whispered. “I hate almost everything about this.”

“I know,” said Draco, and didn’t say anything else.

Harry closed his eyes. _I have to say this. He needs to know._ “But I don’t hate you,” he said. “I can’t.”

Draco still didn’t say anything. Harry felt another mixture of shame and guilt and self-loathing well up. _How can I keep on taking from him like this? What can he possibly be getting out of this? We’re not equals. I don’t give him as much as I take. Shit. How can this possibly last?_

“Stop that,” Draco whispered into his hair. “I can _feel_ you feeling that, you know. And I want to be here, Harry. You’re giving me everything I want right now.”

Harry swallowed, and forced himself, slowly, to believe that that was true. It didn’t need to be true tomorrow, or for the rest of their lives. It might be true right now, and he didn’t really think Draco would lie to him.

Slowly, imperceptibly, he relaxed.

_Maybe it’s not such a bad thing, being seen._

_*_*_*_*_*_*
Interlude: Shall I Offer Thee Congratulations?

February 22nd, 1995

Potter:

I suppose you will want me to offer you congratulations. After all, you managed to uncover and destroy a Death Eater, and to prevent another from killing your brother on the same day.

I shall not offer you congratulations. There is no reason to. If you had paid attention to my warning, and if you had been wary of the man who called himself Moody from the beginning, none of this would have happened.

You will argue that you cannot trust me. What motive had I for warning you? You will want to know that, and say that nothing makes sense without it.

I have told you that motive. Of course I have. You just have chosen not to pay attention to me. I am bored, Potter, bored with all that my Lord and Bellatrix make me do, the useless missions they send me on, the useless curses they inflict on me which no longer hurt any more. You, at least, promise the interest of some excitement. You do things differently. I cannot always predict what will happen around you. You will be glad to know that my leg is intact, that the curse I caught at Lucius’s home did not manage to sever it, but the fact that it happened is a source of intense joy and delight to me, because it is not something that my Lord or Bellatrix would have done. I cannot wait to see what wounds I might take the next time I fight against you.

You are an entertainment to me. You very much were at the Quidditch World Cup, which is why I gave you the warning about Mulciber. And then you chose to disregard it! I am disappointed in you, Potter. Keep this up, and you will not be interesting any more.

For now, though, you are still interesting, especially because Bellatrix clenches her teeth and wails about Mulciber never coming back, and worries that we are too few to continue our Lord’s work. Why does she worry? She must know that our Lord’s work, this year, is not up to us.

I will give you another warning, because you amuse me so. See that you do not misuse this one.

Watch the sun, Potter, and fear it.

With all the regards of self-interest,

Evan Rosier.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Seven: The Bloody Bed

February 22nd, 1995

Severus:

Tell your young charge to take better care of himself. Really, letting him receive letters from Death Eaters? What kind of guardian are you? And yet, I have written him several times throughout the year, and no one has been able to prevent me from doing it. Then I used the Burning Heart Curse on him just outside Lucius Malfoy’s house, and where were you? In jail, because you got yourself caught, like a bloody fool.

Watch out for him, Severus. Be sure that I am not the only one who considers him a fine toy, and who would like to play with him if they can get at him. Tell him to watch the moon. That is what my lord is waiting on. He will say the sun, I might even have said the sun in the letter that I wrote your ward, but it is the moon. Watch it from full to dark, from dark back to full again, and above all for the times when it might permit someone else access to the school.

After all, there was a werewolf on the grounds last year, was there not?

In memories of old fellowship,
Harry looked up from Rosier’s letter, and sighed. “So you don’t believe that his letter to me—or even the mentions of the sun that Voldemort makes in my nightmares—holds any merit?”

“I believe that we will drive ourselves mad in trying to figure out what merit they might hold,” said Snape flatly, his arms folded as he paced back and forth, his robes snapping behind him. Draco, sitting on the couch beside Harry, nudged him the moment Snape’s back was turned, and Harry handed him the letter. Draco read it, frowning.

“Which is it, then?” he asked, looking up when he had finished. “The moon or the sun?”

“That is the point!” Snape snapped, spinning around. “It might be neither. It might be one or the other, but we would fall dead from frustration before figuring it out. This is Evan. He was mad before Azkaban. He was always mad. And his favorite game has always been torturing those whom he wishes to play with mentally. Despite his love for curses that cause physical pain, he prefers seeing someone writhe in the torment of doubt and uncertainty. I watched him fill the heads of Muggle prisoners with so many false beliefs about magic that in the end they committed suicide or submitted in silence to the Killing Curse, unable to tell what was real and what was not.”

Harry hesitated, then decided he had to say something. “He did give me a true warning about Moody.”

“And you were wary of him.” Snape practically lunged towards his desk, looking through the drawers for something. Harry wasn’t surprised to recognize the blue vial of a Calming Potion when he held it up. Snape swallowed it, stood still for a few moments as it worked through his body, and then said, “Much good it did.”

Harry sighed. “That’s true. What would you suggest I do about it, then? I suppose it would do no good to reply to him—”

“Try it, and I will give you detention every night for a month,” said Snape, the calm monotone of his voice making the threat more effective.

Draco muttered something uncomplimentary, but Harry couldn’t decide if it was uncomplimentary towards himself or Snape, and decided not to push it. “All right. Are there any spells that would stop him from sending owls to me, then?”

“None that would not work to turn post owls away from you completely,” said Snape in disgust. “And especially, none that would not interfere with Hogwarts’ wards, probably at an unacceptable level of risk.”

Harry nodded in resignation. He could feel raw magic muttering in the school as the wards realigned themselves around both the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall. “What do we do, then?”

“We pretend that Evan Rosier does not exist.” Snape took up both letters and cast them into his fireplace without pause. “For fourteen years, I believed him dead, and did very well without dwelling on him. Unless he presents himself to our notice again, we can do the same thing now.”

He turned to face Harry. “Though I am curious to know if his comment about using the Burning Heart Curse on you holds any truth.”

“Uh.” Harry knew he had forgotten some things in the recitation he’d given to Snape of what happened during the two months he was in the Ministry, but there was so much; surely he was not expected to remember it all off the top of his head? The night he and Draco had dashed to Malfoy Manor was one of those things they hadn’t mentioned yet. “Well, it’s true that I had a vision that Voldemort was sending Rosier after Mr. Malfoy, because he wanted to know what had happened to the diary Mr. Malfoy retrieved in second year. We got there in time, but Rosier sent an owl with a letter charmed to act as a Portkey, and dragged Mr. Malfoy outside. I went after them, and he—Rosier, I mean—wound up casting the Burning Heart Curse on me.”

“How did you heal from it?” Snape asked quietly.

“My father wouldn’t have left him to suffer.” Draco gave Snape a hard glance, and shoved his shoulder against Harry’s.

“Mr. Malfoy rescued me,” Harry agreed.
Snape stood in silence, thinking. Harry wondered if he would dispute Lucius’s good intentions again, but he said only, “And did Rosier ask him about the diary?”

“Huh?” Harry knew it wasn’t the most eloquent response, but then, this wasn’t a question to which he’d ever given any thought.

“Did Rosier ask him about the diary?” Snape queried patiently. “At all?”

Harry swallowed. “I don’t know,” he said. “He could have done it during the moments before I joined their duel, I suppose. Or Mr. Malfoy just refused to tell him, and started firing curses. Does it matter?”

Snape waved a hand. “It might,” he said. “But with Evan Rosier, as I told you, it might just be another trap designed to lead us into a maze of guessing and counterguessing, which will waste our time.” He tilted his head and fixed a meditative glance on Draco. “You may wish to leave, Draco. Harry and I will be practicing dueling spells, and—”

“I want to stay.” Draco folded his arms.

“You are sure?” Snape drew his wand and banished the table in front of the couch, leaving the couch itself there only until Draco rose to his feet. As he cast protective charms in front of the bookshelves, he added, “You will feel the pain that Harry does when the curses get through to him.”

“I would feel that anyway,” Draco said, and gave Harry a sharp smile. “This way, I can get some training myself, and share a little more of his life.”

Harry rolled his eyes. There was no point in denying what Draco wanted to do. Harry hadn’t sensed any betrayal from him, and doubted he ever would. But that meant that, having let Draco see his weakness, there was no point in keeping him out of further situations where he might see it. He would trust Draco unless he encountered some indication that he could not.

As he and Snape backed away to opposite sides of the room, Harry wondered if he was naïve to think that Draco would never turn against him.

I don’t think so. Just realistic.

“This curse is one that Dolohov would have been the most likely to use against you, were he still alive,” said Snape, and shook his head. “Had not Rosier pretended to die, and impersonated him.” He lifted his wand. “But other Death Eaters will use it as well. The Shield Charm, and most other wards and shields, cannot block it. De Profundis!”

For a moment, Harry felt nothing in particular, and wondered if Snape had miscast the curse, or weakened it.

Then he heard a wind blow around the room, and saw the spells protecting Snape’s bookshelves buckle. At the same moment, wild, screaming Dark rage reared up in his mind, the same kind he had felt when he faced Lily, and the music rose and played in his ears. Harry closed his eyes, fighting hard to control it.

Beyond the rage, Snape explained calmly, “This curse drags your strongest emotions out of the depths of you, and forces you to combat them. It makes enemies go mad, or run away, or begin to pay attention to almost anything but the caster of the curse. You must face and fight it. Once you have conquered it, no one else can use it against you again.”

Harry’s consciousness of anything outside his own emotions vanished, then. He vaguely thought he could hear Draco screaming at Snape in the last moments, but he couldn’t understand the words. And then they, too, were gone, and he was left alone with the Dark.

The urge to smash, to destroy, to fly, to do anything that would express his hatred and his wildness…

This was part of him, and Harry knew that the longer and harder he tried to push it away, the more trouble he would have facing it if it ever broke free.

He had faced something of this power only once before, the night of the Chamber, when Sylarana’s death broke the barriers in his mind apart and loosed the silent self and the cold self. So Harry thought he could do worse than handle this rage by the same method with which he had handled them.
He began to build a new part of his mind for the rage to reside in. He made it beautiful, but sharp-edged, a glittering cage of blades. The Dark music rattled the icicles that hung from it like bells, and then, pleased, curled back around and rattled them again, listening to them chime. Harry made the cage as attractive as he could, before he moved inside it and cast an illusion of limitlessness there.

The image of open sky, of open plains, of open sea, all the boundless things stretching out of sight he had ever seen, went there. And the rage sensed it, and came bounding, eager to stretch itself out in a place where there were no constraints.

Harry shut the cage door after it, and then opened his eyes. Snape and Draco were both at the far end of the room, behind a strong ward. The bookshelves sagged against each other, and a few books had spilled from them, to lie open-faced or with pages pitifully trapped beneath them on the floor. Harry took a deep breath and climbed to his feet, wondering when he had fallen. He wiped at the mixture on his face, of rime from ice and tears from the wind and drool from his mouth.

“And there was a point to that, I suppose?” he murmured.

Snape lowered the ward and stepped towards him. “I mean to begin your training in earnest, Harry,” he said. “I will show you the various curses that the Death Eaters are likely to use against you, and how to defend against them. I will also show you applications of Light spells that they will not expect.” His eyes glinted, hard. “The war is beginning in earnest, and, as you have said, our enemies are not limited to your blood family and Dumbledore. Will you accept this?”

Harry nodded.

“I wish you would bloody well have warned me,” Draco muttered, massaging his skull. “I got an overdose of pain when Harry’s emotions went wild like that.”

Harry moved towards him in concern, but Snape got there before he could, looming over him and staring down.

“Mr. Malfoy.” His voice had gone icy. “Now that I know you have empathy, I can teach you attacks that will increase your advantages with it in battle and defenses that will decrease your disadvantage. But there is no place for whiners in this classroom, as in any other. You will become used to taking in pain, as a result of this gift-curse that you brought on yourself, or you will leave and not attend Harry’s training. Do you understand?”

“That you helped me bring on,” Draco said softly, his eyes glinting in the way that they did when Harry knew he wanted to hurt someone else.

“What does that mean?” Harry asked.

Snape turned with a swift flare of his robes and studied him. Then he said, “I was the one who gave Draco the book with the potion in it that, apparently, allowed him to summon Julia Malfoy.” He gave Draco a dark look. “Of course, if had researched more, he would have found someone else whose gifts were more compatible with his—a better ancestor to make a magical heir out of him.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Then you were the one who put a compulsion on him?”

Snape stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“Draco had a compulsion on him when I was helping him with the potion,” said Harry, taking a step forward. “One that drove him to complete the potion, and ignore nearly everything else while he was doing it. Did you know that that would happen?” He could feel rage unlike the caged Dark fury rising in him. Snape knew how he felt about compulsion. That he should have used it, and that he should have used it on Draco…

I like to think I’d feel just as upset about him using it on anyone. But that’s lying to myself again, which I’ve got to stop doing. I’m more upset about it being Draco than I would be about anyone else.

Snape slowly shook his head. “I knew the book would guide him to what he sought,” he said. “I did not know about the compulsion.”

“Have you ever used the book before?” Harry demanded.
Snape nodded. “Once, to brew a potion that allowed me to see my soul,” he said quietly. “The book gave me the potion. However, I took my time preparing it. It did not drive me the way it appears to have driven Draco.”

“So it was an accident,” Harry whispered, wanting to believe, needing to believe, that his guardian had not really done something that stupid.

“It was,” said Snape. “I can only surmise that Draco’s desperate desire to be a magical heir must have interacted with the magic of the book, and that that prompted the compulsion.” He paused for a long moment, then added delicately, “And, of course, the compulsion that your brother put on him last year, to protect you, has sunken into his mind and twined tight around it.”

Harry shuddered. That means that—

“Sometimes, sir, you need to keep your mouth shut,” said Draco, and scrambled across the room to stand in front of Harry. “I promise, Harry, that compulsion has nothing to do with the way I love you now. I manage to leave you alone when you want me to, don’t I? And I wasn’t protecting you when I made you go out to the Forbidden Forest and face the unicorns.”

“Unicorns,” said Snape flatly.

Harry swallowed, and then managed to smile. “I don’t really believe all this is the result of a compulsion,” he murmured. “I’ve been down that road before, and I was wrong then, too. Thank you, Draco, for making me see reason.”

Draco grabbed his hand and held it as they both turned to face Snape. “I think we’ll accomplish more if we’re honest with each other,” said Harry. “Completely. As long as you promise that you had no idea that that compulsion would come from the book, sir, then we can proceed, and we’ll tell you about the unicorns, and you can tell us about what else happened to you during your confinement.”

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Snape stared hard back at Harry, at the trust shining in the boy’s eyes—trust with a reserve of wariness behind it.

Tell him that I know about the compulsion, and I do not think he will trust me again. He is not rational about compulsion, at all. That is the reason he ate Dumbledore’s magic, because he compelled others.

He needs one adult he can trust right now. Totally. Completely. Speak the truth now, and I will shatter that trust more than a lie ever could. He will close up on me, and begin to treat me much as he treats Dumbledore. Lie to him, and if he finds out about it, he will be upset with me. But I believe that the moment when he finds out will be less dangerous than this one. He has suffered so many wounds in the last week. He needs my support more right now than he will again. When he has grown beyond this a bit, then I can think of telling him the truth.

Snape made his choice.

“I did not know that that would happen to Draco, no,” he said quietly. “As I said, it did not happen to me with the potion that the book chose for me to brew.”

That potion left me with no illusions. I know what I am. I am by no means pleasant, or nice, or without my contradictions.

But I am true to deeper loyalties, he thought, as he watched Harry’s eyes brighten with his trust. I will give him what he needs most right now—support—and the truth later. The same way that, though it would cost me his trust and his love, if I thought that his parents were going to damage him through his hiding of his past, I would expose that past. I care more for his life than for his regard. I would break my promise before I would see him hurt because of it. I spied for the Light when others thought me a traitor and a Death Eater, and Harry matters more to me than that ever did or will.

“I knew that you wouldn’t,” said Harry. “I knew that you weren’t that kind of person.”

You know very little of me, Snape thought, but repeated, “Unicorns?”

“I freed the unicorns,” Harry began.
“Because I made him go out to the Forbidden Forest and do it,” Draco chipped in.

Harry gave him a disgusted glance, but went back and started telling the story from the beginning. Snape listened, and watched Harry’s eyes grow brighter still, and the smug, possessive look on Draco’s face.

This is love, then. Ah. Well. That explains a great deal.

I suppose I must also see to the protection of young Mr. Malfoy, since he is now necessary to making Harry happy. First guard and last defense, and it will probably turn both of them against me in the end. I am prepared to face that.

*******

Someone banged on the door of his room hard enough to make Harry sit up straight, gasping. He glanced around the room, and caught a glimpse of light from Blaise’s bed as he cast a Lumos charm. A moment later, Vince’s voice called, “What the hell?”

“Harry has to come out now,” said Millicent from beyond the door. She didn’t sound as if she had slept at all. “He should be dressed and ready for a long journey.”

“What’s wrong with Millicent?” Draco said, sounding sulky, the way he always was when someone woke him up in the middle of the night. “Long journey? What—“ He seemed to give up the sentence as a bad job, if the sound of his rolling over was any indication. “Can’t it wait until morning?” he muttered.

“I don’t think it can,” said Harry, memory firing at last, and chasing away the last shreds of what could have been a vision of Voldemort, if it had had time to form. He rolled out of bed and hurried to his trunk, searching for a set of robes he could dump on. “I think Mrs. Bulstrode’s having her baby. She asked me to be there when she was born, and this would be nine months since she got pregnant, I think.”

“Some of us are trying to sleep, Potter,” Blaise said, and his Lumos charm went out, as if he could ignore what Harry had just said by sheer force of will.

“Harry?” Draco stuck his head through his curtains as Harry finished pulling on his robes, not bothering with the Slytherin tie. “Do you need someone to go with you?”

Harry shook his head quickly and yanked a hand through his hair, hoping that he looked at least somewhat presentable. “No offense, Draco, but you weren’t invited,” he said. “I don’t think the Bulstrodes would want you there.”

Draco sighed. “If you’re sure—“

“Potter,” Millicent said from beyond the door. Harry knew she only called him by his surname when she was angry at him.

“Sure,” said Harry, smiled at him, and slipped from the room. Millicent caught his hand at once and started tugging him down the stairs. Harry frowned. He had seen she was clutching a small object in her hand, but he didn’t know what it was.

“We’re traveling by Portkey?” he asked. “Or Floo?”

“Neither. There are permanent wards on Blackstone insuring that no Portkeys work there,” said Millicent, and then turned around and let him see what the object was. A small stone, veined with black, but mostly gray, it looked a bit like the device she’d used to take them to the site of the Walpurgis Night fire last year. Harry blinked.

“What is that, then?”

“Something that works like a Portkey, but isn’t,” said Millicent. She didn’t explain, only grasped the stone and twisted the top, which suddenly began to whirl. The air in front of Harry opened as a door would and swung back. Harry stared into the dark corridor beyond it.

“Walk!” Millicent gave him a violent push. Harry managed to save himself from stumbling on the threshold, and began to hurry down the hall. Locked doors passed him, silent and foreboding, with coats of arms on some of them that made him
wonder if they led to the houses of other pureblood families. He had never heard of magic like this.

He turned to ask Millicent a question, but she pushed him up the hall again, one hand firm on his shoulder. The door behind them had closed, Harry noticed, and showed only an endless expanse of dark hall, identical to the one in front of them in every way.

“Go, Harry,” said Millicent. Harry blinked, noticing for the first time the shine of tears in her eyes. “Mother wanted you there. But she wasn’t the one who called me. It was Father, and he said—” Millicent closed her eyes and shook her head. “It’s bad. He said it’s bad.”

Harry sped up, though he wondered what the hell he could do to help Elfrida even if they got there in time. He knew nothing about childbirth or helping babies survive after it.

Does “bad” mean bad for Elfrida? Or Marian? Or both?

He and Millicent ran down the dark, silent hall, not even their footsteps raising much noise, until Millicent tugged him to a halt in front of a huge black door. The coat of arms wasn’t a formal design, only a dark silhouette of a castle. Millicent grasped the lock, and it sparkled and melted under her hand. The door swung open, and this time, Harry did stumble on the threshold as they came into a room bright with light and noise and the scent of blood.

“Millicent,” said Adalrico’s voice, sounding tense and exhausted. “And Potter. I am glad that you came before Elfrida passed.”

Harry shook off Millicent’s hand—easy enough, since she’d moved over to stand next to her father—and forced his eyes to focus on the sight in front of him. Elfrida lay on a bed absolutely soaked with blood. A blanket discreetly covered her legs, but only partway, and Harry could make out that most of the blood must have come from her. Elfrida’s pale hair was spread around her face, and she panted, eyes wide open. The air around her stirred uneasily with magic, powerful enough to raise the hair on his arms. Harry swallowed. This was the result of Elfrida’s puellaris training; not using much magic during the course of daily life, she stored her power up until the moment she could wield it to benefit her children.

But the magic is strong enough to save her life, Harry thought in confusion, as he turned towards Adalrico. She’s not in danger of dying. Or is the baby so badly off that they need the magic to feed to Marian?

The infant cradled in Adalrico’s hands, though, and still slimed in blood, looked healthy enough. Her cord had been cut, and she was crying, face still squashed in on itself, her newborn magic jumping and pulsing around her in its inchoate efforts to soothe her. Harry forced himself to calm down, and look past the expressions of stony sorrow and desolation on Adalrico’s and Millicent’s faces, and get some answers.

“Why is Mrs. Bulstrode going to die?” he demanded.

“Because,” said Adalrico softly, “she has felt that Marian could be her magical heir. Her suspicions grew as the pregnancy came to completion. But the sympathy between her and Marian is of a fleeting, limited kind, as such childish ties often are. Most magical heirs manifest later in life.” Marian wailed, and Adalrico gently adjusted his position, rocking her back and forth. “Elfrida will have to pass her magic to Marian now if she is to make her her heir. And that means that she won’t have enough left to keep herself alive.”

Harry blinked, once, twice. “You—you really think magical heirs are that important?”

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“Of course, Potter.” Millicent snapped the words out without looking at him. Her eyes, and all her attention, were fixed on her tiny sister. “Blood is important, but magic is more so. It’s extremely rare for a family to have two magical heirs in it, one for the father and one for the mother. We’re lucky.” Harry thought he would have said that she didn’t sound lucky, but he didn’t dare speak a word at the moment. “No pureblood family—well, no Dark pureblood family, because the Light ones consider taking a magical heir barbaric, mostly, and stick to blood ones—would give up a chance like this. My mother will sacrifice her life so that Marian can be a more powerful witch.” Millicent let out a shuddering breath. “I knew it might happen when Mother told me that she could sense sympathy between her magic and Marian’s while she was still in the womb. That’s rare. It’s very rare.”

Harry turned his head and met Elfrida’s eyes. “And that is what you want, my lady?” he asked. The title was old, not in use anymore among the human denizens of the wizarding world, but he could not think of what else to call the woman in the bed,
so very alive still, her magic soaring around her like a flight of dragons.

“I do wish I could stay alive to comfort my children,” said Elfrida in a much stronger voice than Harry would have expected, given the pallor of her face. “It will be a hard thing for Marian never to know her mother. But the magic is more important. What makes us wizards and witches is our magic. Next to that, the shelter of blood is pale and comfortless.” It sounded as if she were quoting some catechism, though not one Harry had ever heard.

“But you want to live,” Harry clarified.

Elfrida gave a slow, languorous nod, and fixed her eyes on Adalrico’s arms. “Bring her closer,” she murmured. “I’ll have to pass my magic to her from just a few feet away.”

“Wait,” Harry said, and Adalrico turned to look at him, though he also hurried Marian nearer the bed. “If Elfrida wants to live, then she should live.”

“You cannot stop this, Potter,” Adalrico said. “You might not understand it, but you gave an oath to be a witness to Marian’s birth, and you are an ally of our family. You cannot interfere with the free choice of a woman of that family.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m honoring her choice,” he snapped. “I’m going to make sure that she can pass her magic to Marian and still live.” He stepped up on the left side of the bed and reached down, gripping Elfrida’s arm. She rolled her head to look at him. The white pillow under her hair was stained dark with sweat.

“How can you do that?” she whispered. “You might be able to keep my life in my body, perhaps, but I would be a Squib or even a Muggle. I am a witch, Mr. Potter. I would rather die than live without magic.”

“I don’t intend that you have just your life,” said Harry. “I need to know first of all if this connection will work. Mr. Bulstrode, I should have just as strong a connection to your wife as to you, shouldn’t I? I don’t need to touch your alliance scar to work with her?” He was prepared to bring Adalrico into the connection if he had to, but he would prefer it if he could do this without a fourth person. The link he was basing this on had used only three.

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“Yes, you should be able to,” said Adalrico, sounding bewildered. “Mr. Potter, what—”

“No time!” Elfrida whispered suddenly. “Put her on my arm, Adalrico, now.” Her magic made her voice into a command just this side of compulsion, Harry thought. Her husband hastened to lay Marian on her arm and then step away.

Elfrida seemed to have forgotten about Harry. She smiled into her daughter’s face, and murmured an incantation that Harry did not recognize, in a language he thought wasn’t even Latin; it sang too much. A conduit snapped into place between her forehead and Marian’s. The baby wailed all the louder. The magic swirling around Elfrida flowed towards the conduit, ready to pass on into the infant.

Harry took a deep breath, firmed his grip on Elfrida’s arm, and waited. His body was in the bloody room, feeling Millicent’s and Adalrico’s tense, worried gazes, but his mind was back in the Chamber of Secrets, remembering the trap that Tom Riddle had sprung on him, using the links between Harry and Connor and himself to come to life. He had hurt Connor, which hurt Harry thanks to their twin bond, and pulled Harry’s magic out through the scar his older self had caused.

Elfrida was feeding Marian her magic, and Harry thought his own connections to the Bulstrodes, mother and newborn daughter as well as father and older sister, should work for the other two sides of the circle. Otherwise, he would be pulling power from Marian when he acted. But because he had a connection with Marian and Elfrida based on trust and alliance, not pain and hatred, and he did not want to drain Marian to save her mother’s life, this should work the way he wanted it to.

He hoped.

Elfrida slumped a bit, and Harry knew that she was getting closer to empty. The magic would leave her, and she would perish, perhaps as much out of desire not to live magicless as because she would not have the strength to keep herself from bleeding to death.

Now.

Harry reached down inside himself and began to pull power from his immense store, reversing the process that allowed him
to eat magic from people like Dumbledore and Voldemort.

This time, it was rather like milking a snake of its venom, rather than swallowing power with a snake. The creature gurgled lazily and filled his working hands with magic, which pooled down Harry’s fingers and into Elfrida’s arm. She made a soft, questioning sound, but didn’t look away from her daughter. The conduit between their foreheads shone like a strand of solid diamond now, illuminated from without and within.

Harry drained his magic, careful to feed Elfrida only benevolent or neutral power; he would not want to see what untamed Dark magic might do so near Marian. It was easier than he had thought it would be. His magic unfolded in layer after layer, and he could pick through the layers, choose what he wanted, and siphon it down the link created by their formal alliance. Elfrida’s breathing grew louder, and Harry felt her muscles gaining strength and consistency again, her body surging as it replenished her blood.

For one sudden, wild, beautiful moment, he felt as if he were her, looking out through her eyes, breathing with her lungs, feeling her heart beat with aching familiarity. He could feel her love for Marian, and for Millicent, and for Adalrico—still present and there, that last emotion, but a distant thing compared to her fierce protective love for her children. Harry had never experienced anything like it. The closest things were the sensations he had shared when gazing out through the Hungarian Horntail’s eyes.

He had been afraid for a time that Elfrida’s body would reject his own magic as unfamiliar, but the moment it settled deeply into her muscles and veins, they changed it to suit themselves. She would be a different kind of witch than before, Harry could see that. But as he watched glinting trails of white power changed to a softer gray and snatched into place, cradling her and soothing her and conjuring her softly back to life, he did not think the difference would be that noticeable.

Abruptly, someone broke the link, jerking his hand from Elfrida’s arm. Harry blinked, and looked up. Adalrico was holding his wrist, and staring at him as though he were an intruder, an enemy—

Or something unbelievably strange.

“She will live,” he whispered.

Harry glanced over at Elfrida, and his heart jumped for a moment as he saw that her eyes were shut. Then he realized she was breathing regularly, stirring the sheet that covered her with deep, healthy pants. Little Marian was fast asleep on her mother’s arm, the conduit between their heads faded. She did have some sort of marking on her brow, Harry saw dazedly. He thought it was star-shaped.

“What did you do?” Adalrico whispered. “Were you actually—were you actually giving Elfrida magic that would save her life?”

Harry nodded at him. “Of course.”

“But that would mean sacrificing your power.” Adalrico said it as he might speak of the rape of a child.

Harry smiled tiredly at him and sent his wandless magic traveling around the inside of his skin. “I still have plenty. I’m not noticeably weaker. I promise you, I wouldn’t have killed myself trying to save her. I wouldn’t have done this at all if I wasn’t sure that both of us would live.”

“But that you would do it at all…” Adalrico trailed off and shook his head. He was profoundly pale.

“People matter more to me than magic,” said Harry, wondering why it shocked the man so. Surely he should know it, after allying with me? He moved around the bed and bent over to look into Marian’s face. She looked slightly less like a red, squashed monkey now, and more like a normal baby. The marking on her forehead was blue and, indeed, faintly star-shaped. Harry gently stroked her blood-soaked, naked head. “Hello, little one,” he whispered. “Welcome to the world. I hope that your scar brings you more joy than mine has brought me.”

He felt Millicent’s hand on his shoulder. “Let me take her, Harry,” she said.

Harry nodded, and stepped out of the way so Millicent could pick the baby up. Marian didn’t even wake as her sister took her over to a basin of water standing ready in the corner and began to wash her free of blood and birthing fluid.
“Mr. Potter.”

Harry blinked at Adalrico.

“You have done a great thing for us this night,” Adalrico said, “and we cannot pay the debt we owe you.”

“There is no debt,” said Harry, and yawned. He smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I just—“ The words got lost in another yawn.

“We understand,” said Adalrico, and steered him to a divan in the corner. “Rest. Millicent will take you back to Hogwarts in the morning.”

Harry nodded at him, and then lay down on the divan and closed his eyes. In seconds, he had lost the soft splashing of water and the murmurs of Millicent talking to her new sister to darkness.

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Millicent gently wrapped Marian up in a loose white cloth they’d had lying ready and carried her back to rest on Elfrida’s chest. House elves had already come, tidied the bed, clothed her mother in a clean gown—without disturbing or waking her—and piled new pillows behind her head. Millicent touched her mother and her sister both on the cheek, and then stepped away. Her father looked up from staring at Harry. He’d put a blanket over him.

“Why?” he asked.

Millicent understood the question behind the question. She moved over to join her father in watching Harry for a few moments before she answered, though. Harry’s face was neutral in sleep, not entirely relaxed and not entirely innocent—just ordinary. He slept like someone who had no idea at all what he’d done.

He didn’t, Millicent knew. He hadn’t been raised in a Dark pureblood family, where three kinds of pride were strong: that of tradition, that of blood, and that of magic. He didn’t realize what one of their families would go through to have magical heirs and not just ordinary blood ones, children who could share their parents’ powers and not just the descent that was the heritage of every child, those of Muggles and Mudbloods as well as purebloods. Millicent had been preparing since the new year, when her parents told her that Marian might well be Elfrida’s magical heir, to lose her mother. Of course she would sacrifice her powers to give her daughter a chance at carrying them and being a strong witch, and of course she would not want to live as a weak shell afterwards. If the transfer of magic itself did not kill her, she would have committed suicide.

And now Harry had come along, with his magic that any Dark pureblood would have killed and tortured dozens of people to wield and that any Dark pureblood family would have lost half its members to claim for one of their children, and given part of it to Elfrida, easily, without hesitation, not even seeming to know that it was a sacrifice.

It was so easy that it would have been an insult, if what Harry said had not been true, Millicent thought. He cared more about people than about magic. He saw a chance to save her mother’s life, and, more, to insure that she still lived as a witch, and he took it.

To him, it was just the right thing to do; he had the capability and opportunity to do it, so he did. He didn’t seem aware that he’d just tied the Bulstrodes to him with bonds stronger than steel.

“Millicent.”

Millicent glanced up. Her father rested one hand on her shoulder and drew her near him, as he always did when he was about to say something particularly important.

“It doesn’t matter if he never Declares for the Dark,” her father whispered. “We cannot lose him. He will be more than just another Lord to follow, or someone to reclaim the wizarding world for the Dark in our generation. Stand firm in your guardianship over him. If it comes to it, you may use any and all of our gifts to rescue him or help him continue to live. I give you formal permission.”

Millicent blinked rapidly, then smiled. The Bulstrodes, like most Dark pureblood families, had several gifts that supposedly ran from magical heir to magical heir. They kept them secret as a matter of course, and none of their enemies, or even most
of their allies, would ever be quite sure which heir could do what.

Millicent had manifested as Adalrico’s heir when she was six, and was able to do everything that he could do. He trusted her absolutely, but he had never given her leave to use any of the gifts outside Blackstone before.

“I promise, Father,” she said.

Adalrico kissed her on the forehead and went to sit with his wife and newest child. Millicent sat down beside the divan to watch Harry. She knew that she couldn’t have slept that night, even if she wanted to.

You don’t even realize that what you did was unusual, she thought, in mingled exasperation and fondness for the boy on the couch. And that’s one of the reasons, though far from the only one, that we’ll lay down our lives for you.

Whether you want us to or not. You’ve got yourself allies, Harry Potter, and we don’t intend to let you go.

*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Eight: Irrevocably Changed

“Your magic feels less powerful,” was the first thing Draco announced the next morning.

Harry dropped his spoon into his porridge, and hissed at Draco around a mouthful of it. Several of the Slytherins had turned to look at them: Blaise with that bemused look he affected since Harry had learned Draco was in love with him, Millicent with smug satisfaction, Pansy with a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, and Montague with the sullenness he showed towards anyone who wasn’t Pansy.

“It is not!” Harry hissed, when he’d finally managed to swallow. “I gave up part of the magic I took from the Headmaster. Nothing else.” He started eating again, to show how little stock he put in Draco’s ridiculous suppositions.

“But it feels less powerful,” Draco persisted, with that special emphasis he usually only gave to judgments in which his empathy was involved somehow.

Harry gave him a dark look. “I know that your gift doesn’t let you sense that,” he whispered.

Draco shrugged at him. “You’ve nearly intoxicated me since you took the magic from Dumbledore,” he said. “And now I can think with a bit of a clearer head. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Thank Merlin for that,” Millicent muttered. “Does that mean that we’ll get a bit fewer of the lovelorn looks and sighs and mutters about ‘Harry darling?’”

Draco’s face turned nearly the color of a ripe apple. “I have never called Harry that,” he said.

“Yes, you have,” said Blaise helpfully. “Usually in dreams, that’s true, and not when you’re awake, but you have. At least you don’t have to share a room with him,” he added to Millicent. “Bloody disgusting, it is.”

“I do not!” Draco howled.

Harry winked at Millicent, thanking her for distracting Draco from the subject he’d been trying to talk about. Unfortunately for him, Draco caught the wink, and pinned him with a deadly glare.

“You’re sure that you only gave up the magic that you took from Dumbledore?” he asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m sure. Besides, I don’t see why everyone thinks it’s such a large sacrifice. The magic is doing Millicent’s mother more good than it ever was just sitting around inside me. And I can siphon off Dumbledore, or someone else, again if I ever want more.” He was beginning to realize that that was a large part of the reason Dumbledore feared him. Harry could take magic from another person, and in that case, the other wizard or witch was permanently weakened. Harry truly could have drained Dumbledore down into a Squib or worse if he wished.

Just like Lily warned me I could, right before she tried to cast the phoenix web on me again.
Harry shook his head, and set the memories aside. They wouldn’t do him any good, and he wasn’t about to start casually draining other people. Besides, Draco had gone back to the interrogation.

“Millicent’s mother?”

Millicent wore a broad smile. “Harry saved my mother’s life last night,” she announced. “My little sister Marian is my mother’s magical heir, but you know what it means when a baby is a magical heir: the sympathy between child and parent doesn’t last that long, and there’s almost no chance of her regaining the sympathy later in life.” Heads nodded around the Slytherin table. “Mother gave her magic to Marian, and Harry gave some of his magic to my mother, so that she could continue living.” She bit into her toast and didn’t look up as whispers ran around the table.

Harry rolled his eyes when awed and shocked and disbelieving glances came his way. Why the hell is this such a big deal? Wouldn’t most people take the chance to save a life if they could? I’m just lucky that I have the power to do something about it when the chance comes up.

“Why did you choose Dumbledore’s power to give up?” Draco whispered to him.

Harry shrugged. “It was nearest the surface, and it was Light, so it wouldn’t hurt Mrs. Bulstrode or Marian.”

Draco nodded, then joined the staring. Harry shrugged once more and started eating his porridge. He’d become better at dealing with stares in the days since the Second Task, when it became clear that they wouldn’t stop any time soon. Harry thought they would have to stop at some point, though. The Daily Prophet would start carrying stories that people thought more interesting. People would start realizing that killing someone was not something they should honor him for.

I may be living in a mad world at the moment, but it will steady itself.

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“Mr. Potter. A word with you, please?”

Harry wasn’t surprised that Draco stayed at his side as he turned around. After all, he’d hardly had good things happen to him when he was alone with Defense Against the Dark Arts professors in the past, except for Remus.

Karkaroff, who’d taken over the Defense classes gradually during the last week, stood surveying him expectantly for a moment, as though he already thought Harry should know what he wanted to talk about. His fingers played with his left sleeve. Harry didn’t have to see the arm to know what rested there: the Dark Mark. Karkaroff had been a Death Eater.

I seem to be surrounded by them.

“I wanted to reassure you,” Karkaroff blurted suddenly, “that I’m not going to do the same things Mulciber did.”

Harry couldn’t help snorting as he raised his eyes to the professor’s face. “I should hope not, sir,” he said. “One Death Eater cursing the professors and opening holes in the wards is enough.”

Karkaroff flinched, then nodded eagerly. “Yes, yes, that’s it exactly,” he whispered. “I—I would not do anything like that. I repented of being a Death Eater in the end, which is why I’ve been Headmaster of Durmstrang and not in Azkaban or Obscuratio, the German prison. I know that you have no reason to believe me, but—”

“I believe you because you’re free,” Harry interrupted him. “You would hardly go running back to Voldemort now, I think.”

Karkaroff flinched again, though this time Harry knew it was from the pronunciation of the Dark Lord’s name. “Yes,” he whispered. “I—but it is more than that. I want it to be more than that.” He paused, visibly gathering his courage. Harry studied him, and wondered that he’d never noticed the man’s fear before. He had always seemed large and blustering, and he was a competent, if monotonous, teacher who betrayed little of his emotions in his class. Of course, Harry hadn’t had any reason to pay him much attention before this. “I want you to know that you can trust me as more than just someone who ran because he was frightened.”

“Liar,” said Draco, so quietly that Harry didn’t think Karkaroff heard. He looked at Draco, but he just shook his head, so
Harry resigned himself to waiting for the explanation.

“I want—I want to become something more than that,” said Karkaroff, and gave a gusty sigh. Harry wrinkled his nose. *Has he been drinking? Smoking? His breath smells foul.* “I want to become part of the fight against my Lord, if he—if he returns.” He swallowed, and his voice cracked on the words. “Do you understand?” He was obviously appealing to Harry now, eyes wide. “A true fighter, not a neutral. I want you to know that you don’t have to distrust me just because I bear the Dark Mark.”

Harry studied him in silence for a moment. He could grasp what Karkaroff was saying, though the man’s trembling nervousness made Harry wonder how much his promise would really hold up in battle. At least Peter, who’d also been a Death Eater with a cowardly reputation, had proven to be much stronger than Harry had thought he was.

More than that, though, he wondered something else.

“Why aren’t you telling this to Headmaster Dumbledore, sir?” he asked. “Or Professor McGonagall? They’re the ones who are in charge of strategy and planning for the War. They’re the ones who fought in the first war against Voldemort. They’re the ones you’d need to convince.”

Karkaroff gave a hysterical little laugh. “They are not the ones who killed one of my former comrades,” he said, his accent becoming steadily thicker. “And they are not one of the two wizards setting Dark magic on fire across Europe right now.”

Harry swallowed, slowly. He had not realized that the Dark singing he’d heard under the lake could be heard by other people.

*So Voldemort is one...and I am the other.*

“You think that you need to convince me,” he said, and Karkaroff nodded at once.

“I am a coward,” he said, voice marginally calmer. “I admit that. I tried to trade the names of other—of Death Eaters for my freedom. I admit that. But I want to change things, now that I know it is not just bad dreams that my Lord is returned. I want to fight at your side. But, to do that, I know that you might distrust me at first, so I must soothe your distrust.”

Harry sighed. He didn’t think that anything would actually test Karkaroff as much as the stress of battle, and he had no idea how long it might be before he and Voldemort actually clashed in open war.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” he said, unsure of whether he would have thought of Karkaroff at all if the man hadn’t pressed his presence into Harry’s mind. “Thank you for telling me.”

Karkaroff nodded at him, and then turned away to spell the board clean for the next class. Harry walked out the door, frowning and wondering what was stranger: that Karkaroff should have approached him at all, or that there might be people out there beyond Britain watching his every move. To have his actions tested on the stage of Hogwarts, or Britain, was frightening enough.

“He’s a liar,” Draco whispered.

“You said that,” Harry murmured, recalled to himself. “About which part?”

“He *did* run because he was frightened,” said Draco. “He ran from several battles, including one that happened not long before the night you brought down—You-Know-Who.” Harry hissed at him to keep his voice down, and Draco paused to roll his eyes at him. “You know that people will have to find out about you being the Boy-Who-Lived someday, Harry. My parents already know,” he added, as if that were supposed to help.

“Your parents are special cases. Now, tell me more about Karkaroff.”

“He was captured crouching in a dark hole and shaking in his boots,” said Draco. “And soaked in piss, apparently. And that wasn’t the first time. He was actually captured by the Aurors once before his trial, but they let him go because they couldn’t believe how pitiful he was. He’s a wet rag, and though you might get some good use out of him if you twist him, you’ll mostly get water.”

Harry shrugged and worked his way over to the wall so that a couple Ravenclaw sixth-years could pass. They sneered at him,
but there was fear behind their eyes. Without much surprise, Harry recognized Gorgon and Jones, the bullies who used to torment Luna. “I don’t know if I’ll make much use of him at all, but thank you. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Hey, Potter!”

Harry looked slowly over his shoulder. Gorgon was standing slightly apart from Jones, his wand in his hand. Harry remembered the duel they’d had earlier that year over the Hound with the surname of Gorgon, and braced his legs.

Gorgon didn’t attack, though. He just sneered again, and said, “I suppose that you think you’re all high and mighty now, bullying the Headmaster.”

Harry winced. Skeeter’s articles, if no one else’s, had played that angle up. “I didn’t bully the Headmaster,” he said. “He was compelling people. I just wanted him to stop, and he did when I showed him I was serious.”

Gorgon came a step forward. “And now what? What are you going to do for an encore? Drain more people?” He waved one hand in front of himself as Jones laughed. “Here’s my magic. Come and take it, if you think you can defeat me.”

Harry looked past the mocking words, studying Gorgon’s face. It was convulsed with laughter, but the laughter had a desperate edge to it.

He’s afraid. I’m not surprised. If I can feed on anyone’s magic, why would they think I’d limit myself to Dumbledore?

That just made Harry weary. He shook his head. “I don’t have a reason to, Gorgon,” he said.

“You’re giving him a reason, you fool.”

Harry jumped slightly, and then recognized Cho standing behind Gorgon with her hands on her hips. Jones was gaping at her. Gorgon turned around and sneered at her in turn.

“What do you know? You’ve read the articles. What makes you think that we won’t be his next—”

“Because he only does that when he’s angry,” Cho said. “Really angry.” She looked at Harry. “Isn’t that right, Harry?”

Harry nodded slowly, trying to work out why she was defending him.

“There,” said Cho, to Gorgon. “I trust Harry. I don’t have any reason not to trust him. He saved my life.” She flicked her head, tossing her long dark hair over her shoulder. “And until I see him drain someone he’s not angry at, then I won’t consider him a danger to me.” She smiled at Harry. “Is the lesson that you’re teaching still scheduled for tonight after dinner, Harry?”

“Um, yes,” said Harry, and heard Draco give a possessive little growl beside him that was probably inspired by Cho’s smile.

“Good,” said Cho. “Cedric and I will be there, and I’ll drag Marietta away from her books if I have to. She’s not going to learn any more Charms that way. They’re already overflowing from her ears as it is.” She smiled once more at Harry, and then turned and strode up the hall. Gorgon and Jones stood there and looked like fools in her wake.

Harry tugged on Draco’s arm and got him walking again. He still looked murderous.

“She has a boyfriend,” Harry whispered. “She and Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff, went to the Yule Ball together, and they’re officially dating now. Relax.”

“She just looks at you too intently,” Draco whispered back. “They always look at you too intently, Harry.”

Harry couldn’t help chuckling, even if the sound was sharp and bitten-off. “Welcome to my entire life at the moment, Draco.”

Draco tugged on his arm, stopping him. Harry turned and waited patiently as Draco studied him. Harry’s skin still crawled when he did that, but he was learning to get used to it. Draco saw things about him that no one else would, things that Harry allowed him to see, and so it was silly to object to these moments of silent scrutiny.
“It really bothers you, doesn’t it?” Draco said at last. “Not just when someone makes baseless accusations at you, like Gorgon and Jones, but when someone calls attention to you in any way.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “And now, come on. We’re going to be late for dinner if we don’t hurry.”

He tugged at Draco’s hand, but Draco held him still. “I’ll try not to do that anymore, then,” he whispered. “Now that I really know.” He gave Harry a quick hug and pulled away. “Sorry for this morning.”

It took Harry a moment to work out that he was talking about calling the Slytherin table’s attention to Harry’s diminished magic. “You don’t need to apologize,” he said. “Really, Draco.”

“Hush, I want to,” Draco responded, and got him moving again. Harry eyed him sideways, and then shook his head.

Sometimes, Draco Malfoy, you are very strange.

Dinner was never a quiet affair for Harry anymore, because of the post owls.

There had been the streams of Howlers after Skeeter’s article and the others about the Triwizard Tournament came out: some of them scolding him for taking the spotlight from the true Champions, believing he was really Connor’s jealous younger brother, but most of them upset that Harry had dared to go against the Headmaster. Harry had listened to them and hadn’t flinched, not really. It was no more than he expected. Dumbledore’s reputation was still too bright in most of the wizarding world for Harry to destroy him without darkening his own.

Unless you used the accusations of child abuse...

Harry swallowed and put the thought away. If he had his way, no one would ever learn about that who didn’t already know. Ever.

There had been the letters congratulating him for defeating Death Eaters or rescuing Moody or standing up for his beliefs, gushing, praising things that Harry pushed aside and buried his head in his arms over when Millicent or Pansy read them aloud in high, girlish voices. Harry couldn’t understand why people wrote the damn things. At least the Howlers were understandable, if embarrassing. These…these people didn’t know him, and sometimes they asked for incomprehensible things, like for him to write back and tell them how he became so wise. Harry so far hadn’t answered a single letter. The mere thought of doing so set shame burning on his cheeks, because there was no way that he could give them what they wanted. What they wanted was impossible. They’d created some illusion who didn’t exist.

Draco carefully gathered all those letters and put them away. Harry refused to ask what he did with them.

But dinner tonight was different, and actually useful, because Harry received three letters he’d been waiting for. The first came on the leg of a gray owl that Harry had already learned to recognize as one of St. Mungo’s preferred messengers. He extended bits of his pudding to the owl in thanks while he read the letter.

March 1st, 1995

Dear Mr. Potter:

As you requested, we have begun tests on the patients we believed to have been tortured into insanity by the Cruciatus or other similar curses during the first war with You-Know-Who. We have discovered anomalies in the minds of several. As Mulciber was an Imperius Curse specialist, we believe that he may have adapted and modified the spell to outlast not just his death, but the passage of time and most efforts to relieve the spell with Finite Incantatem.

We have, however, managed to heal two witches who were victims of Mulciber’s last recorded attack before his capture by the Aurors in late 1981. We believe that their lesser length of time spent under the spell has something to do with our success, but we eventually hope to apply the technique to the minds of other sufferers. A Finite Incantatem cast cooperatively, through the means of a Light ritual, provided the means we sought.
I am grateful beyond words for your suggestion to us that we look into the minds of some of Mulciber’s victims. While some are indeed insane, that others might come back to themselves is a gift.

Sincerely,
Miriam Strout
Head Healer
Janus Thickey Ward.

Harry couldn’t help smiling as he ruffled the owl’s feathers one more time and borrowed a sheet of parchment from Pansy to scribble an enthusiastic reply to Healer Strout. The owl took wing the moment he finished binding the letter, as if eager to be away from the table. Of course, Harry considered, that might have something to do with the large, elegant black bird bearing towards him.

This owl landed and refused to take any refreshment, eying Harry haughtily as she extended her leg. Harry knew better than to pet her feathers, either. This was Narcissa’s new owl, Regina, and she had made it quite clear that she only tolerated delivering messages to Hogwarts. Nor did she like the food, the company of other owls, people touching her, people remarking on her, or people asking her if a reply was expected. She would wait for a reply if she was expected to take one, and spent most of her time twisting her head around and glaring at every other student at the Slytherin table with large orange eyes. She did not look at Harry himself, as if he were beneath her contempt.

Harry unfolded the letter curiously; he had a notion why Narcissa might be writing to him, but he had hardly expected any new news on this front.

Dear Harry:

I wish to know if you have any time free this weekend. I have been to most of the easily accessible Black houses by now, and the wards have permitted me free passage into all of them. I believe that Regulus may be somewhere nearby, self-aware enough to have recognized me and lowered the wards of his own free will. Our best chance for finding his body is, I believe, Wayhouse, a small place used as a private summer home by my cousin Arcturus Black in the early part of this century. I have found signs of Regulus’s presence there, though I have not been able to sense the presence of any human flesh or blood.

Please write back. The tapestry in Grimmauld Place reassures me that Regulus is still alive, and he may yet need our help.

Yours in grace,
Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry didn’t need to write a long reply to this one, either, only a formal statement of his consent, and Regina hopped off and into the air with it inside a minute. The offended wriggle of her tail showed that she thought the reading and reply had taken rather too long for her delicate sensibilities.

The third letter didn’t ride with an owl, but with a gyrfalcon. She landed right beside Harry’s plate and commenced to eat half his pudding before he could remove the letter from her leg. He paused when he saw the formal crest on it: rising sun and stars.

Salutations, Mr. Potter.

I suppose that you think it has taken me a very great time to get back to you, especially as I spoke of contacting your Dark allies at Christmas. However, I did not wish to write to you again until I had a substantial victory to report, and here it is: Dolores Umbridge is on the verge of losing her position as the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

No Dark spells were used. None were needed. I merely made sure to expose Madam Umbridge’s insufficiencies in the right places and to the right people, and even her allies began to abandon her in disgust. I anticipate having her out of the Ministry in no more than two months at the most. They may shuffle her to another position first, but she no longer has any substantial power.

Now, on to the meat of this letter, which I promised you when first we met in the Forbidden Forest. I, Tybalt Starrise, elder son of Alba Starrise and Tiberius Griffinsnest, joined partner of John Smythe-Blyton, plight my loyalty and my faith to you, in Merlin’s name, under the Light, unto the Light unending.
I should warn you that you must not expect the allegiance of the rest of my family to come with me. My brother Pharos is our uncle’s heir, and is wary of doing anything that might upset him. At the moment, pledging allegiance or help to someone who is in any way a Dark wizard would upset him.

My uncle...Augustus Starrise hates what he cannot control. That includes me, and it is the reason that he accepted Pharos as heir. He is barred from participation in politics until this October. Then I fear that he will make trouble for you again, unless I can bring him around in the meantime. I will try, but I am not sure if I can manage to do so. Most of our so-called discussions wind up as shouting matches.

I want from you, Lord-who-will-not-be-called-so, assurance that the assistance of Light wizards does not disgust you, and that you will not require us to give up our principles if we fight beside you. I am not and never can be of the Dark.

You may think that you had fooled me completely that day in the Forest, but you did not. I went along with you, Harry Potter, out of curiosity, agreement with you about the disgusting nature of people like Madam Umbridge, and eagerness to see what would happen next. I see with clear eyes, and so does my John, and both of us are waiting to see what you will do next.

Yours under the Light,
Tybalt Starrise.

Harry raised his eyebrows when he was done, and wrote a slightly longer reply this time, though he had to shove the greedy gyrfalcon’s head aside to do so.

Dear Mr. Starrise:

I will not require you to give up your principles if you fight beside me. Nor am I disgusted with Light wizards, though between Headmaster Dumbledore and wizards like the former Minister, I have known little good from them. If you pledge me loyalty and allegiance, I will do the same for you.

I am sorry to hear about your uncle, and am hesitant to cause any family quarrels. Will it damage you irreparably in his eyes to hear that you have written me, fought beside me, promised me your help? If the answer to any of those questions is yes, I will understand if you break off this alliance.

I am gratified to hear that you were not taken in by my manipulations. One always wants one’s allies to be intelligent.

I am at your disposal for the answering of questions.

Yours sincerely,
Harry Potter.

Harry signed with a flourish, bound the letter to the gyrfalcon’s leg, and forcefully pushed her away from his plate. She gave him a hurt look and bounded aloft. Heads craned back to watch her go, then turned to look at Harry.

Harry was glad enough to stand, clear his throat, and hurry on to the lesson he had promised to give for students of all the Houses after dinner.

******

“Harry!”

Harry had been concentrating on ignoring the stares as he walked with Draco to the abandoned classroom designated for that evening’s lesson, but he turned around at this voice. “Connor!” he said, and felt a smile sweep his face of the kind he hadn’t given since his brother took the Slicing Curse. “Finally out of the hospital wing?”

“Yes.” Connor winced slightly as he walked towards Harry, but he was walking again, and his gaze was free of the delirium that had overtaken him for nearly a week when the Slicing Curse, the Imperius Curse, and the healing potions that Madam Pomfrey had given him had reacted together. “And ready to attend this lesson tonight.” He cocked his head stubbornly at Harry.
“We’re not going to be doing any spells,” said Harry. He didn’t want to do something active that Connor couldn’t participate in because of his wounds. “Just pureblood history tonight.”

Connor uttered a long-suffering sigh. “If I must.”

“You’re damn lucky to be able to sit in on it at all, Potter,” Draco said, voice low and vicious. “Most people who have as much knowledge as Harry does don’t just spread it around to all and sundry.”

Harry rolled his eyes at Draco, especially when he saw Connor struggling to maintain, and then maintaining, his calm. “Don’t mind him, please,” he told Connor. “He’s just pissy when he thinks someone else is getting more than his fair share of my attention.”

“I am not,” Draco began.

“Yes, you are,” said Connor, relaxed again, and giving a smile that was dangerously near a smirk. “Harry told me that you declared your love for him. Congratulations. I told him you would be mad not to be in love with him by now.” He paused significantly. “Of course, you should still be careful, Malfoy. With all the foot-stomping and face-flushing go on right now, someone might think you’re acting a bit like a girl.”

Draco drew his wand. Connor grinned and reached for his.

“Stop it, the both of you,” said Harry, not looking forward to being trapped in a small room with them for the next few hours. “Connor, stop teasing Draco. Draco, stop acting as though Connor is going to do something to hurt me at any moment. He’s my brother, of course he’s going to tease us about this.” He rolled his eyes and moved on down the hall, feeling like a parent scolding two unruly children.

“Harry,” Draco said softly, catching up with him, “he really hurt you last year.”

“And I’ve forgiven him for it,” said Harry. “And other people for worse things.” He didn’t have to speak Lucius’s name for Draco to know it was hanging there in the air between them. “So leave off, all right?”

Draco nodded, subdued, and stepped into the room beside him. A good number of students were already there, Harry saw, including some who hadn’t come the other times. Millicent sat in one of the front desks, swinging her legs, her gaze calm and inquisitive. Blaise lounged in a chair in the second row, with one arm around Ginny Weasley, who seemed caught between enjoyment at his actions and annoyance at the way Blaise was eyeing Ron—or maybe at the way Ron was watching them, Harry didn’t know. A few Durmstrang students sat beside Blaise, their expressions cautious. Hermione and Zacharias were in the third row, where they usually sat, but arguing in low, furious voices. Cho grinned and waved from the back of the room, where Cedric was massaging her shoulders.

“History lesson tonight,” Harry announced, and ignored the chorus of groans that resulted. “Anyone who doesn’t like that is welcome to leave.”

No one did. Luna did say from the back of the room, though, her voice soft and sweet, “Are you going to tell us the story of Rowena and Salazar?”

Harry smiled at her, and ignored Draco’s exasperated sound. Some things, Draco was just going to have to get used to. Harry knew of no other way of soothing his jealousy than by actions like letting Draco touch him where no one else was allowed. Words certainly didn’t work. “I don’t know that story well enough to tell it, Luna.”

“Too bad,” said Luna, sounding dreamy. “It is a very pretty story. They had words about Muggleborns, but Rowena also put a blanket over Salazar one night when he had fallen asleep from studying too hard, and he did the same for her. The chairs remember.”

The rest of the room seemed to want to fall into an embarrassed silence after that, but Harry started talking instead. “I’m going to tell a story that I do know, though I suppose you might call it a legend and not history. How many of you know what happened to divide Light and Dark wizards in Merlin’s time?”

A few foreheads wrinkled, and one or two hands rose, wavering, and dropped. Harry nodded. He had suspected that most people would know stories much nearer to them in history—taking the feud as coming from Gryffindor’s and Slytherin’s
“I read about this in a book that my godfather fetched for me out of his private collection.” He didn’t say Sirius’s name. It was still hard to do so, and he wanted a storytelling voice, not one wavering and cracking with emotion. “Merlin was a force for unity among wizardkind, the most powerful Lord that anyone had ever seen—or ever has, really. He himself knew and used both Light and Dark magic, and he was probably the one who established some of the definitions of them. For that, wizards and witches honored him.

“He had two children—though the legend didn’t say if they were adopted children, or relatives of his, or actual daughters, or just witches whom he knew and cherished. He thought that he would teach both of them all his knowledge, so that they could be the leaders among wizards and witches when he at last passed. But while he did so, the two sisters were convinced that he had not done so. Partly that was Merlin’s fault, since he was a Seer of the future and couldn’t tell them the truth about things like prophecies, which made them believe he was always keeping secrets. But partly that was the sisters’ fault, because they let the promised position of leadership go to their heads, and they wanted more and more, knowledge of spells that didn’t exist and gifts that Merlin didn’t possess and control of magical creatures that weren’t theirs to bind.” Harry felt his voice waver on that last, in spite of himself. It made him far angrier than it had the first time he read the story.

He paused to study the faces of his audience. Hermione’s voice had grown a little louder, but otherwise, everyone was absorbed in the tale. Someone muttered something about this being loads better than Professor Binns, and a murmur of agreeable laughter ran around the room.

Harry smiled and continued talking. “When Merlin died, his daughters were with him, and he believed they would go from his deathbed out to lead the people. What happened was that they declared war on each other, in full sight of all the wizards and witches who had come to see Merlin pass. They used all the magic they knew. They were both such powerful Ladies that they destroyed each other almost at once. But each, when she saw that she was dying, worked a mighty enchantment, a spell whose name has been forgotten because it was too dangerous to keep alive.

“That spell bound their hatred and their cause and their magic into the watching wizards and witches, making everyone their magical heirs, in a way. However, because the two sisters were equal in strength, the enchantments ripped their power, which was the sum of all power, in half, and one set of wizards and witches was infused with Light principles and spells, the other with Dark principles and spells.”

“I never heard of anything like that,” said Padma Patil, her brow slightly wrinkled as she leaned forward. “That would mean—that would mean that most of the divisions between us are just the product of jealousy and hatred, and that we’re just acting out a feud centuries old.” She sounded uncertain, even disgusted, but her voice gained strength as she continued. “The differences between Light and Dark wizards are greater than that.”

“Oh, yes, now,” Harry agreed, raising his voice slightly to be heard over Hermione’s hisses at Zacharias. “But that is what the story claimed was their origin. And it doesn’t pretend to explain everything like the way that Light and Dark families handle themselves in battle. It does say, though, why so many attempts at reconciliation have failed. The sisters couldn’t forgive each other, and they sent their hatred through their spells. Even when someone does make a motion, on one side or the other, to give up a grudge or make a marriage across magical lines, it doesn’t matter. The hatred just suffers a little interruption, and goes right on affecting people in more subtle ways, such as making them think the people who forgive grudges are weak, or turn their backs on the newly married couple.”

He could see by the looks on most people’s faces that he’d displeased them greatly with that story. Harry shrugged. “I don’t know if I should believe it myself,” he offered. “I like it because it suggests that wizards are all the same, really, and the differences between us aren’t unconquerable. If everyone could give up their grudges at once, perhaps we could break the spell.”

Privately, Harry thought that the story probably wasn’t true, or that he couldn’t afford to believe it if it was. If nothing else, it might give him too much hope.

“What about you?” That was Neville, his face flushing as people looked at him, but his courage firm as he held Harry’s eye. “Do you think that you could break the spell? Do you think you’re strong enough?”

Harry blinked, and shifted uncomfortably as gazes turned towards him, again. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t think so. Those sisters were the strongest Ladies who ever existed, if the story is right, Merlin’s heirs. I know my place. I’m nowhere
“I don’t know if power matters so much as determination,” said Millicent. “And when you are determined, Harry, you can do nearly anything.” She turned towards the class. “Harry saved my mother’s life last night, when she gave her magic to my newborn sister and Harry gave part of his magic to her.”

Hermione’s head whipped around, and she was the first one to ask a question. “What does that mean, Harry? Does that mean that she’s not a witch now? Or is she a truly powerful one, like you?”

Harry could see that new thought taking fire in the eyes around him. Most people had been frightened at the thought that he might absorb their magic. They hadn’t thought it was possible for him to give it back.

“I gave her enough to bring her back up to average levels,” said Harry firmly. “I used some—some of the magic I’d taken from the Headmaster.” He swallowed against the way their looks sharpened. “She **is** a witch, but not connected to me in any way. I surrendered that magic, not lent it. I made it part of her.”

Millicent grinned at him. And Harry realized, too late, as the murmurs raced around the room, that she’d probably done this on purpose, to make people notice and realize what he’d done.

He wondered, then, if his position among the students had irrevocably changed, so that no matter what he did, it would be impossible to hide himself again.

“No, Zacharias!”

Harry jerked his head around. Hermione was on her feet, hands planted on her hips, her face an angry red.

“No, I haven’t been dating Krum, and no, I don’t know why he chose me for his hostage, and no, I don’t care for you to tell me *yet again* that there must be something between me and Krum because of it! You’re not being rational or intelligent about this, you prat!” Her hand connected with Zacharias’s cheek in a ringing slap, and she marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Harry sat in silence as the snickers began, sorry for Hermione and Zacharias, but relieved that no one was staring at him now. Maybe not so irrevocably changed, after all. **People will always find something else to focus on.**

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“It’s smaller than I imagined,” Harry breathed, looking around Wayhouse.

And it was—certainly smaller than Grimmauld Place. But it was more intensely magical. Harry could feel the staircases themselves thrumming with latent power, both Light and Dark. The walls, made of a smooth, polished silvery wood that he didn’t recognize, and without a splinter or knot when he ran his hand across them, sang a bass note that was calmer than most of the wild singing he’d heard of late. The rooms had ceilings barely high enough to clear Narcissa’s head, and were almost all rounded at the corners, formed like chambers in a hollow tree. Objects were everywhere, ordinary ones strewn carelessly among magical artifacts.

“It’s beautiful,” Harry told Narcissa, as they entered a room with a large table in the middle, scattered with books. It had no other furniture, so Harry didn’t know if it was meant as a reading room, or if someone had carted the books in and left them here. “Did you spend any time here when you were a child?”

Narcissa smiled a bit, and reached out to touch one of the walls. Harry blinked as her finger vanished to the first knuckle, before the wall spat it out again. “A few summers, or parts of summers. We usually wound up leaving early. Wayhouse has a—unique sense of humor. Rather like Cousin Arcturus,” she added dryly, as if reminded of something. “If it had really wanted to reject us, then it wouldn’t have mattered if Regulus lowered the wards. We still wouldn’t have been able to get in.”

Harry nodded, and turned his attention to the books as Narcissa cast a few more sensing spells, trying to find any trace of Regulus’s body. He caught his breath when he saw the top one, and reached out to stroke it with a shaking hand. He understood why Narcissa had wanted him to see it.

The book looked like a journal, and on the front had a silvery sketch of a lion, highlighted here and there with twinkling
points Harry thought were meant to represent stars. That in itself wouldn’t have been significant, but Harry knew what Regulus had been named after—the heart of the lion, a star blazing in the constellation Leo.

“Why do you think no one found this before us?” he whispered to Narcissa.

“I don’t know.” Narcissa admitted, looking up from what must have been yet another failed spell, judging by the expression on her face. “It was hidden in a small compartment at the foot of the stairs, but Bella—Bellatrix could have found it there. I did find signs that she’d been here, too, years ago, but that she left in haste. Perhaps she just didn’t have time to search.”

Harry nodded, and opened the book.

He faced a multitude of scraps of paper, as though Regulus or someone else had torn out many pages. There were two or three pages still loaded with shaky handwriting, though. Harry bent over and, squinting, managed to read them.

May 1st, 1981

Oh, Merlin, am I really going to do this? I think I am, or what was all that planning about? But V. doesn’t know I know about L. That won’t last long.

L. Why did I pick that one? Because I don’t know where the others are, of course. Stupid question.

Going to the c. shouldn’t take much more than three days. Have to take someone else. Can’t trust anyone. Suppose I’ll take R., then. There’s no one to miss him.

S. got in trouble again last night. P. helped him—but I don’t know if it was helped him get in trouble, or helped him get out of it. I wish I could dare trust them. They’re the most competent out of all of us. I wish there was something I could say that wouldn’t get me killed on hearing of it.

May 5th, 1981

I meant to go to the c. last night. Had the perfect opportunity. Got R. drunk and everything.

And then I couldn’t do it. I looked at R., and then S. came in and said V. wanted me for something, and my courage fled. That’s always been my problem, lack of courage. Wish I were more like Sir. He had the courage to cast our parents away, everything about the fucking Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. Would that I could do the same.

June 21st, 1981

Still haven’t gone to c. I have to go soon. V. still doesn’t know I know about L., but that can’t last long. And now there’s some muttering about a prophecy. P. has apparently suggested that the Potters have something to do with it, or the Longbottoms. I know that I should despise him, hate him. He’s betraying Sir. and his friends. So why can’t I shake the feeling that he’s among the best of us? Except maybe S.

Certainly better than me.

July 17th, 1981

Done. Done.

I couldn’t take R. after all. My courage failed me. I took an M. and crossed to the c. Merlin, it was horrible. I wouldn’t have gone at all if I’d known what it would cost. But I went, and I’ve got L.

It can’t be long now. I only have a few days to live. I have to figure out how to destroy L., before V. starts noticing it’s gone.

Merlin help me.

July 19th, 1981

No time. No time. V. found out, and they’re coming for me. I have to take L. where I know it will be safe.
They’re coming.

They’re at the door. Just enough time to hide this.

If someone actually finds this and knows what the hell I’m talking about, then search for the others by the light of the fourth brightest one of us.

Harry took a shaky breath and leaned away from the journal. Narcissa met his eyes.

“You should take the journal with you,” she said quietly. “Now that the wards are down, Bellatrix may be able to come here any time she wants, if she thinks of it.”

Harry nodded, and slid the journal into his pocket. “The Death Eaters caught him here, then.”

Narcissa nodded in turn. “I think they did. But I have no idea what he was talking about. Do you?”

Harry thought about it, but had to shake his head. He thought he knew who at least a few of the coded references in the diary must be to—P. had to be Peter—but R. could have had several identities, and the torn pages of the journal must be carrying the secret of the c. and the L. with them.

“And I can’t find any trace of him here,” Narcissa continued, the frustration breaking through her voice like sharp rocks through water. “Maybe they didn’t place his body in Wayhouse. There may be places in Grimmauld that we haven’t tried yet, or Silver-Mirror, or Coby-by-the-Sea.” She shut her eyes in thought a moment. “We might as well search, though.”

And search they did, but turned up nothing. Harry passed through a room filled with maps and books, another with portraits that winked at him or leered or loudly demanded their tea, a room strung with delicately colored cobwebs on which silver spiders kept up a shining patrol, a nursery strewn with blocks and dolls and carved wooden and brass figurines, a bedchamber filled with small nasty things that darted out to bite his ankles and then went back to hiding under the bed, and numerous others, but could find nothing that would point to Regulus. Narcissa investigated the hiding places she knew, and also came up empty.

Narcissa clasped his hand before she Apparated them back to Hogwarts. “We will find him, Harry. We have come closer today than ever before. At least we know that he was in Wayhouse as late as July 1981.”

Harry nodded. He was captured just a few days before Connor and I turned a year old. That’s odd to think about.

“Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said, and, as they Apparated back, braced himself for a scolding from Draco for leaving him behind, though it was Draco’s own fault that he hadn’t woken up to repeated shakings and invitations to come along.

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Minerva sat down, slowly and shakily, behind her desk, and rubbed one hand over her eyes. Both the tasks of readjusting the wards to take notice of her and keeping an eye on Albus Dumbledore were exhausting, and she was not truly sure which one was worse.

The wards were difficult to coax and persuade. Many of them were not really sentient, only devoted to their task of protecting the walls and windows and grounds of the school—protective spell piled on protective spell, until they became not just a compendium of defenses but a separate thing. The Founders had created most of them, and then Headmasters down the centuries, and Dumbledore had woven more. The ones that Dumbledore had created were particularly sulky when asked to notice her. If it were not for that first ward in the Great Hall, which tended to follow Minerva as a crawling snake of blue light, she thought she would have given up in discouragement.

And then there was Albus, constantly speaking of the first war and reminding her of what good the Light had done then, and was she really going to turn back on the Light now, with Voldemort rising again? He tugged up so many memories that sometimes Minerva thought she had spent more time that day looking at them than the wards. And the hell of it was, some of what he said was right. The Light did have a part to play in the war, and it did need a strong leader, one who, if not unquestioned, at least had enough weight of reputation and trust from the people around him to get things done without waging a dozen arguments.
What he’s blind to, Minerva thought, as she warmed herself a cup of tea and prepared to settle down to neglected marking, is that that leader can’t be him anymore. I wonder if it could have been from the time he decided to bind Harry with a phoenix web.

The full truth of that had come out in the past two weeks, as well. Minerva swallowed sickness and bowed her head as she considered it.

Something soft and warm nudged her hand. Minerva blinked down, and saw the blue ward there. It crawled into her lap and curled up like a kitten, demanding to be patted with another push of its “head” against her hand. Ordinarily it protected the Gryffindor table, but now it seemed to have adopted her. Minerva smiled slightly and caressed the ward. A tingle like lightning ran up her arm.

“You will become the leader we need.”

Minerva jerked her head up with a startled gasp. Someone was standing in the corner of her office, a cloaked and hooded figure. Minerva started to lift her wand from the desk, until she realized that the ward was curled up in her lap, still purring, and not deigning to notice the figure.

“Who are you?” Minerva hissed, smelling smoke and fire.

“My name is Acies,” said the figure, in a deep, hoarse voice that Minerva couldn’t be certain was a woman’s, though her instinct was to say so. “I shall not give you my surname at the moment. It would cause problems. Suffice it to say that I can pass in and out of the Hogwarts wards, and I have been observing you and Harry, and I like what I see in both cases.”

Minerva picked up her wand, ward be damned. “If you hurt anyone here—” she began.

“I do not want to,” said Acies. “I came only to establish the beginning of a connection that we must have. I can see that.”

“Are you a Seer, then?” Minerva asked, her annoyance rising. *Merlin knows we do not need another Trelawney running about the grounds.* Minerva despised Divination, mostly because its practitioners claimed so much for it that was not even possible.

“I can see around some corners that concern myself,” said Acies. “Not all. This time, I wanted to see you. I have seen you. I will go now.” She turned and walked through the wall.

Minerva stared hard, then rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn’t seeing things. No, the figure was gone, and the wards in the stone, some of the first to be attuned to her, hummed on happily. Minerva picked up her cup of tea and took a sip without removing her eyes from the spot on the wall where Acies had vanished.

The beginning of a connection we must have.

You will become the leader we need.

Minerva almost wanted to believe the words, because there was something hopeful in them.

But anyone who could pass in and out of the wards was bound to cause trouble. Minerva was responsible for part of the safety of the school now, and she was ashamed enough about the part she had played in weakening the wards earlier in the year, even if that part had been unwitting.

She turned back to her students’ essays, her lips pursing. *Damn Seers and their superstitious nonsense! It’s not enough to have to listen to Trelawney’s babbling at the head table, now I have to do it in my own office…*

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Chapter Forty-Nine: Must You Remind Everyone That You Are a Parselmouth?

Harry was very pleased with himself when he shut his eyes that night in the third week of March. He had had another guarded conversation with Karkaroff, in which, while he hadn’t promised anything, the man seemed predisposed to ally
himself more closely with Harry. He was getting along with Snape, at least vaguely, and Draco. James’s letters were not too awful. Dumbledore kept his distance and muttered every now and again. The amount of post had diminished, probably because there had been only one article about him in the *Daily Prophet* this week, and that had been mostly Skeeter digging up and rehashing old facts. Connor was doing well with Parvati, and if Hermione was avoiding Zacharias right now, it was no more than the prat deserved. The other Slytherins had mostly fallen into comfortable routines in which they ignored Harry’s newfound prominence, at least to his eyes. His friends were happy. He felt he could sleep the sleep of the just.

Of course, that meant his sleep was all the more likely to be interrupted, and he really should have known that.

“*Wake up.*”

Harry blinked his eyes open, and saw one of the Many clinging to his arm, its agitated swaying back and forth bringing him out of sleep more effectively than even Millicent’s banging on the door a few weeks ago had done. This was a snake that could spit poison in his eyes if it felt that he wasn’t waking up fast enough. Harry touched its back to calm it, and said, low enough that he wouldn’t wake the other boys, “What is it?”

“Our eggs! They are hatching! We thought that you would like to watch the birth of a new hive.” The snake curled back on itself, as though it thought Harry would really refuse an invitation like that.

Harry paused before accepting it, though. His instincts might be wrong, but in that case, the worst that would happen was that Draco would mutter about being woken up and say no. “Can I invite a friend to come witness the hatching with me?”

“As long as he does not break the eggs.” The Many snake tightened its tail around Harry’s left wrist. “And as long as he hurries.”

Harry nodded, then dragged on his robes again, performed a warming charm—edge of spring or not, it would be cold in the Forest—and then padded over to Draco’s bed. When he opened the curtains, Draco was lying there with a silly smile on his face. Harry hesitated again, but decided Draco could have pleasant dreams almost any night of the week, while the birth of a Many hive was not something that would happen often. He reached out and shook his shoulder.

“Harry,” Draco muttered, coming awake. Harry wasn’t sure whether he was talking to his real or his dream self, at least until Draco blinked and focused on him. “What’s the matter?”

“Must something be the matter every time I’m awake in the middle of the night?” Harry asked.

“Yes, it must,” said Draco, sitting up and swatting at invisible things in his hair. “It always has been so far.”

Harry shook his head and gestured so that Draco could see the snake on his arm. “I’ve been asked to attend the hatching of their eggs. Do you want to come along?”

Draco stared at him for so long that Harry started to get worried. Should I not even have asked him? What is the matter?

“Draco, if you don’t want to, then you don’t—“

“Thank you,” Draco said, low and heartfelt, and then hurried to put his own robes on. Harry watched him in puzzlement, which only increased when Draco turned and flashed him a dazzling smile.

*He is acting strange again.*

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“Here we are.”

Draco had followed him mostly in silence, though once or twice he had commented on how cold it was, and he had complained about tripping over his feet until Harry had cast a mild light spell. Now, though, he blinked and stared at the hole in the ground. “If the nest’s underground, then how can we see the hatching?”

It wasn’t something Harry had thought to ask the Many snake. He hissed at it, and the cobra gave a slight wriggle of irritation. Harry suspected most of the hive’s attention was on what was happening beneath them, and they resented having to spare a bit of themselves to answer him. “*You will be shown.*”
Harry repeated that to Draco, who didn’t look impressed. “What do you mean, shown—“

The dirt beneath their feet abruptly turned both green and gold. Harry gasped aloud as he watched it. This was not the clear, shining light that had poured forth from his skin the day he freed the unicorns. Instead, it was gold and green darkness, if there was such a thing, the color of the Many snakes’ scales. The cobra wrapped more tightly around Harry’s arm, and as he gazed into the darkness, he could make out the writhing bodies of the hive. Beneath and on and around them were the eggs, a deep green, like unbroken emeralds.

“Tell your friend to take hold of you.”

Harry reached out his right hand, and Draco came over and took it without being asked. He only seemed to see the light and the nest then. Harry felt him give one incredulous shiver before he stood stock still.

Harry, for his part, watched raptly as the snakes writhed. They were hissing—not Parseltongue, because he could hear this quite clearly, and it wasn’t words. It was rather like the concerted sound they’d used to frighten Tybalt and John the day Harry met them in the woods. They sang in unison to welcome their children to the world, and, well, if the song was sibilant and discordant and tuneless, at least it made for an impressive fanfare for a birth.

Then a sound as of drums answered them. Harry jumped before he realized that the hammering came from within the dark green eggs. The small snakes were writhing back to their parents, or perhaps responding to the song of the hiss, and driving their heads and bodies against the shells that imprisoned them.

Singing and drumming, the hive raised their mingled music in the Forbidden Forest on the edge of spring. Harry felt a quieter wonder that he had on the day he freed the unicorns, but it was wonder nonetheless. Draco’s hand tightened its grip on his. Harry clutched him back without looking at him. He didn’t think he could have removed his gaze from the Many if he tried.

The pounding became so intense that Harry was surprised the eggs had not fractured yet. As if sensing his confusion, the snake on his arm spoke words that mingled effortlessly with the communal hiss. “A hive of the Many begins their lives as one. The eggs are laid at different times, but that is the last moment they will ever be apart.”

As the snake had said, the eggs burst all at once, clusters of emerald shell springing into the air and flying away, though they dropped back from the dirt roof Harry had almost forgotten was there. The tiny snakes, about a third of the size of their parents, sped out and wrapped around each other, forming a great ball. Harry could hear their greetings to each other, in voices that were probably not shriller than those of the adult Many, but sounded like it.

He smiled, watching them, and so he saw the moment when the web erupted from the dirt and tried to take them.

Harry stretched out a hand and caught the web on a wind of his magic. The bright orange thing snapped at him, splitting itself apart into jaws and talons and then running together again. Harry ignored that, and studied the construction of the damn thing. The Many had acquired a web when they came into the Forest, and he had not had the chance to see it before it took them. Now, though, he didn’t intend to lose the opportunity of seeing one close at hand.

The orange web pressed forward, mindless, against his constraints, wanting the tiny new hive. Harry frowned, and made his decision. They were born free. They should remain so.

He clasped his hands together and squeezed. The web closed together into a ball as well, shrieking in agitation. Now that Harry’s wandless magic was bound more closely to his body, he found it easier to use gestures to command it, and as he bore down, mashing his palms together, the web shrank into a concentrated ball of orange light and then winked out.

“Thank you.”

Harry nodded absently at the snake on his arm. Draco’s hand on his shook him back into awareness, and Harry glanced at him. “What did you just do?” Draco whispered. His eyes were wide, his hands shaking as if he couldn’t decide whether to ask the question or not.
Harry grinned at him. “Destroyed a web.” Gently, he removed his wrist from Draco’s grasp and took a step forward. The music of the hissing still wove around him, calmed from its earlier height but by no means forgotten. Harry could sense the orange web around the Many. It was not so complex after all, though made to seem so by the constant motions of the snakes it bound.

“What would you do if you were free?” He spoke to the snake on his arm with confidence, knowing that the mind that listened to him was the mind of the hive itself.

The answer was a long time in coming. Harry wondered if they had to think about it that much, or if they simply wondered what he wanted to hear. He hoped it was the first and not the latter. They deserved the ability to think for themselves. Every wizard and magical creature born did.

“We would stay here in the Forest. We would hunt. We would not attack wizards unless they came along and attacked us. The Forest is more than wide enough for us, and now that we have hatched a new hive here, we have made it home as it has not been. We can bear the taste of webs a bit longer as yet. We no longer wish to return to the home where we were born. We would stay here and refrain from roaming and biting wizards.”

Harry nodded. Even in Africa, Many hives usually did not roam about and bite people; they stayed in their dens in remote areas, and killed rodents, and communed with their own thoughts. “Then I shall free you.”

He knelt down and laid his hands on the dirt, still glowing with that dusky green-gold light that let him see the underground nest. Most of the adult snakes had ceased dancing now, and lay where they were, looking up at him. Harry felt the regard of dozens of clear golden eyes.

Their stillness made it easier. He reached out and gathered up the corners of their web with his will. So long as he wasn’t actively preventing it from doing what it was made to do, it passively let him take it.

Harry checked the positions of his fingers, took a deep breath, and then ripped his hands backwards.

He felt resistance almost at once, as if the web really bound his hands and were not down there, tied around the adult snakes. The very air screamed and fought him. The snake on his arm hissed and thrashed. The web stiffened and struggled to maintain its strands, part of an enchantment so old and strong that Harry did not know who had set it, one Lord or Lady or many wizards working in cooperation. Harry could feel sticky, slimy strands sliding across his mouth and nose. He suspected that he felt what it was like for one of the hive to dwell in the web.

No longer. I will this to crack. I will it to shred. It is no longer a necessary prohibition. They have given their word, and anyone who ventures into the Forbidden Forest and hunts them is taking the risk associated with free will.

The web went taut. It might be simple, but it was very deeply-rooted, Harry knew, if a new one could spring to life every time a lot of dangerous new creatures were born in the Forest. He was struggling with the roots of a mountain, trying to tear up a tree with his bare hands, trying to separate the clouds from the sky.

I will this to crack. I will it to shred.

His hands trembled and shook, and slowly inched towards each other. If he could just bring them together behind his back, Harry thought, he would break the web. And as he channeled his will and his magic towards that task, his belief made it so, and his hands moved towards each other with more confidence.

The web was shrieking now, and Harry could feel wind stirring the branches of the Forest. There were secondary enchantments attached to the web, ones that were supposed to alert the Headmaster of the school that it had been tampered with. But Dumbledore, Harry hoped, would know better than to interfere.

I will this to crack. I will it to shred.

His fingertips brushed each other.

Now.
The web tore with a shattering symphony of hisses. Harry’s hands slammed together hard enough to make his arms ache. The web around him screamed, and screamed, and splintered apart into nothingness.

The silence that followed, though not really silence because of the Many’s hissing, still felt deafening. Harry panted, more exhausted than he had thought he would be. He had fought no web before that was so much an effort of sheer will. He felt Draco’s hand on his shoulder, and leaned against it willingly, unable to move his arms or stand as yet. He felt his heart bounding strongly in his chest, and concentrated on that, until he felt the snake on his arm slide down his skin.

“Thank you,” said the mingled voice.

Harry opened his eyes and focused on the snake. “Of course,” he murmured, and watched it slide over to the hole in the earth and downward. The green and golden darkness flared once more and showed him the sight of the old Many surrounding the new Many and welcoming them, before it dissolved. Harry and Draco stood on what was, to all appearances, an ordinary patch of earth, except for the hole in the middle of it.

“Come on,” Draco whispered at last, when Harry could feel his eyes falling shut. “We can’t sleep in the Forest. I’m sure it’s unhealthy.”

Harry laughed at that, and even his voice sounded raspy and used, though he hadn’t been aware of screaming. He stood. “You’re right. Let’s get back to our room.” He sneaked a glance at Draco, whose expression he could see well enough in the Lumos light, though sometimes with odd shadows at the corners of his mouth and jaw. “Worth coming out here to see?”

“Oh, yes.” Draco smiled at him. “Even if I couldn’t see half of what you did. Watching them hatch was—” He shook his head and broke off. “Thank you,” he said at last, in the same tone he had used in their room.

“I didn’t arrange for it to happen,” said Harry, a bit bemused.

Draco faced him for a moment, though he continued walking sideways so that Harry didn’t have to slow—a good thing, since he didn’t know if he could convince his tired feet to start this long journey more than once. “Not for that,” he said. “For asking me to come with you.”

Harry smiled. “I thought you would enjoy it. Besides, I wanted you here with me.”

******

He should have a snake. It’s wrong that he doesn’t.

Harry had fallen asleep almost instantly when he crawled into his bed. Draco had thought he would. The clearing had filled with the overpowering scent of roses as he worked his magic on the invisible—to Draco—webs, and then he had stumbled on his way out of the Forest, numerous times. He slept deeply now, his chest rising and falling in rhythmic breaths.

Draco lingered for a moment, though, watching him, since there was no one awake to tell him off and make him go back to bed.

He enjoys the company of snakes so much. He should have one. But what kind? Not a Locusta. I don’t think he could stand to have one again, and besides, they’re illegal and they can speak into his head. I don’t want a snake to be closer to him than I am.

Runespoors are illegal to keep as pets, too. Are ashwinders? I’ll have to check. They’re hard to keep alive, though, I think. But it should be a magical snake. He’d appreciate it more.

Draco grinned as he climbed back into his own bed. It wasn’t often he had an idea for a birthday gift months in advance.

But that’s what I want him to get, so that’s what he gets. Not to mention that it’ll be good for him.

Draco was quite sure that he slept the sleep of the just that night.

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Harry dropped his fork when someone prodded him in the ribs. “Ow!” he complained, rubbing his side. “Keep your elbows to yourself, Millicent.” Having her poke him this early in the morning could leave him short of breath for the rest of the day.

“Look at this,” she insisted, and pushed the Daily Prophet across the table at him.

Harry sighed and peered at it, wondering what Skeeter or Melinda Honeywhistle, her main rival in reporting lead stories, would say now. It would probably be something about the Tournament, or Death Eaters, since they had nothing new to report.

He stared when he realized that the lead story featured a blurred photograph of himself crouched on the ground in the Forbidden Forest with his hands clasped behind his back, and that Draco stood beside him, bending over him. A Many snake obviously encircled his arm, and the headline above the photograph read:

HARRY POTTER SAVES HOGWARTS FROM THE WRATH OF SNAKES

The byline was Skeeter’s, of course. Harry shook his head, eyes narrowing. He had started thinking she must have some magical advantage to keep reporting stories like this when he would have been sure to see her normally, and it was about time he found out what it was.

He became aware of the nervous edge to the students’ stares then—he’d already forced himself to ignore so many stares that he’d missed the new emotion animating most of these—and rolled his eyes at them. Most of them looked away hastily, as though they thought the supposed Parselmouth savior would set his snakes on them if they weren’t careful. Others continued looking, particularly among the Durmstrang students.

“So, is it true?” Millicent persisted.

“Of course not.” Harry handed the paper back to her. “I freed the Many hive from a web on them. I wasn’t protecting the school from them. More like the other way round,” he muttered, and dug into his food.

He got about three bites in when he became aware that most of the Slytherin table was still staring at him. He slammed the fork down. He knew he was being petulant, but Merlin, he hadn’t done anything remarkable, and they knew that he hated being looked at. “What?”

“You still went out to the Forbidden Forest last night and did something with snakes,” Pansy summarized. She shook her head. “What you did doesn’t really matter, Harry. It’s newsworthy.” She folded her arms, and looked, for a moment, remarkably like Hawthorn. “Really, I think that you should be taking advantage of this publicity, not resisting it. You could do all kinds of things with it. Convince people that not all Slytherins are evil. Refute the idea that you’re evil in any way.” Her eyes drifted to the head table, and she lowered her voice. “Get rid of Dumbledore, or at least lessen his power.”

“It’s a kind of false power,” said Harry impatiently. “You’ve already seen how fickle most people who read the articles are. They’ll turn around when a better story comes along. I much prefer to rely on magic and alliances and the good opinions of people I can actually trust.”

“False or no, it’s still attributed to you.” Pansy poked him now, and Harry wondered when she’d become so bossy. “One thing I learned from my father is that you shouldn’t give up any kind of advantage that you received through your own efforts, even if you didn’t know you were going to receive it.”

Harry thought that Dragonsbane probably knew what he was talking about. Necromancy required so many sacrifices that only a driving passion could take a wizard very far into it, and Pansy’s father had probably seen many spells and rituals that didn’t work out exactly as he thought they would, thanks to the lack of common knowledge about the discipline. Some of them would have to have worked out well for him, or he wouldn’t be alive. “I’ll think about it,” he said, one of his favorite phrases when he wanted to fob off attention.

Pansy frowned at him and started to say something else, but shrieks from the front of the Hall interrupted her.

Harry blinked and frowned in that direction, only to see a large green-golden ball rolling out from under the Hufflepuff table. It made its way directly towards him. Harry could tell it was the new Many long before they arrived.

“What would you like?” he asked them, a bit surprised that they’d come. Even some of the Slytherins jumped and gasped at
his sudden use of Parseltongue. Harry rolled his eyes, stood, and stepped around the table. He could worry about what damage this was doing to his reputation later. For now, the main thing was to make sure that the hive left without biting anyone, and without any of the tiny cobras getting stepped on.

“We wish to thank you for making sure we were free.” No, it wasn’t his imagination; the hisses in his ears were definitely high and piping. “Our parents said thank you, but we did not.”

Harry blinked. He had not imagined that the hive cobras had such a notion of manners. “Well, you’ve said it, and I thank you in turn,” he murmured. “Now, don’t you think you should be in the Forest? You will need to hunt.”

“But that is not all,” said the hive. “We wish to give you a gift for freeing us.”

“That’s quite unnecessary,” said Harry, feeling the first faint stirrings of alarm. “Your thanks is more than enough.”

The Many ignored him. Harry supposed each hive had a distinct temper; this one already felt different, more independent and prone to doing whatever the hell the hive mind wanted. “We can smell animosity rolling off the powerful one at the high perch. We could bite off his head and bring it to you.”

Harry blinked in Dumbledore’s direction. Dumbledore had a frown like a thundercloud, and he gave Harry a glance that said if he did not move the Many out of the Hall, now, there would be consequences. “That’s, um, really not necessary,” he said. “I don’t eat heads.”

“Ah!” said the Many, in a tone of happy discovery, and the small bodies that made up the top of the hive lashed. “Then we could bring you his heart.” The ball started to roll towards the high table.

“No!” Harry yelped, and stumbled after them. The hive came to a halt and waited patiently for him, though some hisses were muttering about stupid snake-speaking humans who didn’t know what they wanted. “Really, nothing from him. He, ah, he already gave me a gift of magic.”

“Hm. Then tell us someone stupid, and we shall bite them for you.”

Harry could not quite keep from glancing in the direction of the Ravenclaw table, where Gorgon and Jones sat petrified at the far end. The hive practically bounced as they rolled towards them, and their chatter now concerned the desirability of ridding the world of idiots.

“No, not them, either,” said Harry wearily.

The hive pulled up, and now its collective voice was haughty. “We do wish to thank you, but you are being most ungrateful in return.”

Harry looked around the Hall. Most eyes were fixed on him, though their owners had ceased to scream and sat in outraged silence. “Most people here are afraid of me,” he said. “Could you do something that would reassure them?”

“Why?” The Many were most definitely sulking. “Let them be afraid. It is not our fault that they are stupid and will die if we bite them.”

“Something beautiful,” Harry said as persuasively as he could. “Something that will show you off, and let them see you to advantage.”

The hive paused only a moment then. Then the great ball of it broke apart, and snakes raced in every direction, climbing the stone walls. Others slithered over to Harry and climbed his legs and body the way their parents had in Knockturn Alley. Two of them looped lazily around his head and hissed at those people who screamed.

Harry, his heart in his throat, hoped that the snakes were not going to make themselves the last beautiful sight most of the people here would ever see. From the height the great majority of them had climbed to on the walls, they could hit many eyes with their spray of venom.

But they did not. Instead, they paused, and then began to glow with vivid patterns of green and golden darkness, the same kind of light that had illuminated their nest last night.
Harry caught his breath in wonder. Around him, most people did the same. Where Harry’s platitudes in English, and certainly the sight of the Many, would not have reassured them, the sight of the hive glowing like jeweled sculptures did. Beauty had a way of getting through to people, Harry had found.

The light varied, rippling across the room, shading from brilliant gold near the head table to deepest emerald near the back of the Slytherin one. The snakes coiled on Harry’s head beamed yellow light in one direction and green in the other, crawling in circles to insure the beams varied. The ones on his body created a chaotic medley of flashes and glimmers and gleams, appearing as one color and then another whenever they wanted.

Harry heard some gasps and sighs by the time the snakes descended from the walls and him, gathered themselves into a ball, and rolled out the door again. He called a soft farewell, and received a hiss that said he was lucky to have seen the light, and that he should visit them sometime in the Forest.

The silence when the Many had left at least did not resolve into screams or yells of protest immediately. Instead, the students chattered, and gave broken sighs, and muttered among themselves as they watched Harry walk over to the bench at the Slytherin table and start eating again.

They might be frightened, Harry knew, but the fact remained that Harry had managed to get the snakes to leave without biting anyone. At least some people had to think that meant more than just the prelude to an attack, or a showing-off of his power.

At least some of them.

Since he refused to raise his eyes from the plate for the rest of the meal, however, he really didn’t know what percentage of the stares were frightened, which angry, which resentful, and which hopeful.

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Harry took a deep breath of the clean, cold air and folded his arms on the windowsill of the Owlery. Hedwig coasted down to him, sat on his shoulder, and nibbled at his ear.

Harry looked out over the Forbidden Forest, then closed his eyes. The pressure of the stares had got so much that he’d finally come up here to be alone, asking even Draco to stay behind. Draco had looked a bit put out, as though he’d thought ten people would wrap themselves around Harry and declare their love for him the moment his back was turned, but had let him go.

Harry had another reason for wanting to come up here. It was a year ago today, the first day of spring, that he’d met Connor up here and accidentally had the last of his phoenix web shredded by his brother’s compulsion.

Hedwig demanded petting. Harry obliged her, his mind tumbling back over the last year and wondering if what he’d endured had been worth it. He thought so.

I haven’t entirely kept the promise I made to myself, though, he thought, as Hedwig grabbed his hand and pulled it to the spot on her neck where she wanted to be stroked. Not to lie, or to seek out my lies if I did, to try to catch sight of all the places I could stumble and make mistakes, to see all the hidden corners of my being and expose them to the light. I have to do that to be a good vates and leader—the kind it seems I’m going to be whether I want to be or not.

I have to do better as far as that’s concerned, he thought, as he watched the sunset.

Take that, you bastard!

Harry jumped. That last thought had no reason to be in his head. He turned cautiously, peering around, and wondering if Dumbledore had come up to the Owlery and inflicted him with it for some reason.

Has it been so long, the injured voice said, that you’ve forgotten who I am, what I sounded like, the very voice of your old comrade?

Harry swallowed, and, though he had no reason to speak aloud, felt he had to. “Regulus?” he whispered.
Yes. Merlin, did Regulus sound smug. It took me a while, but I managed to fight free of Voldemort. He thought he was so smart, tucking me in a little dark place again. But I’m used to little dark places, thanks to him. I struggled and cursed and cursed and struggled again until I was free.

Harry laughed in spite of himself, feeling his heart lift. “I heard you scream when you were torn away from my mind. I thought Voldemort must have hurt you, maybe destroyed you.”

He couldn’t hurt me that badly, not in that diminished state he’s in. Seen him in your dreams yet? Harry felt flickers of visions teasing the edges of his consciousness, as Regulus apparently went through his memories of the last six months. No, I see you haven’t. Good on you. He looks like a deformed baby.

“I haven’t seen what he looks like, so you’re going to tell me?” Harry protested, leaning against the windowsill. Hedwig obviously gave up on the prospect of getting properly petted, and flew back to her perch. Harry could not seem to stop grinning. “I don’t want to know what he looks like.”

You have to, said Regulus, voice unexpectedly soft. You’ll have to fight him at some point—holy Merlin, please tell me that you did not duel Rosier again.

“That and lots of other things,” said Harry wryly, clenching a hand on the back of his neck. He was overjoyed to have Regulus back, but there would be a lot of adjusting to do as he got Regulus used to some basic facts of his life. “You—missed quite a bit. And I missed you.”

So I see, and so I communicate to you. More rummaging, and then Regulus paused, though Harry didn’t know what memory he was seeing until he whispered, If I had a body, I would kill your mother.

Not you, too, said Harry, switching to silent speech as a Hufflepuff first-year came up the stairs and slipped over to a barn owl on a perch. She kept giving him awed glances. Harry stared out the window and did his best to look like an ordinary tormented hero until she was gone. Everybody wants to punish my mother, for some reason.

Some reason. This is lots of reasons. How dare she say—

“I don’t want to hear it again,” Harry whispered. “Please, Regulus, don’t make me live through it. She’s been punished. It’s enough. Everybody else has agreed to leave it alone.” Well, except for Scrimgeour. And Lucius. And Narcissa. And Hawthorn. And Adalrico. But everybody else has.

Regulus gave a gusty sigh, but gave up that tangent. Harry smiled slightly as he muttered his way through more of Harry’s memories, then began laughing. I see that your little Malfoy nemesis finally gathered his courage to tell you that he loved you.

“He’s not my nemesis,” Harry protested. “He’s quite calm when he gets his own way. And why the ‘finally?’”

He’s a menace to other people, said Regulus firmly. And I knew before I—left—that he loved you. I was just waiting, somewhat impatiently, for him to have both the time and the lack of self-absorption to say it.

“Believe me, I know how lucky I am,” Harry muttered.

Both of you are lucky, said Regulus absently, and then went through the rest of Harry’s memories, while Harry grinned out the window, and reflected that, the Many’s misguided notion of a gift aside, he was enjoying this first day of spring much more than he had the corresponding day last year.

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Draco had forced himself to concentrate on Defense Against the Dark Arts homework after Harry went upstairs. Karkaroff’s teaching style was far different than Mulciber’s, and he believed in having students read their textbooks and then copy passages out of them. Draco had sometimes managed to read five sentences without looking at the door to their room.

When he looked up as the door opened, therefore, he told himself that he really deserved to set the book aside, as a reward for being so good.
Harry came in with his head bowed for some reason, but he looked up soon enough, and Draco’s breath caught at the way his eyes shone. Harry had looked harassed most of the day, but now he appeared as he had last night, with joy overflowing him.

“Guess what,” he said.

“I can’t guess,” said Draco, bouncing a hand off his knee. He wouldn’t go over to Harry, not when getting closer might change the expression on his face, but he needed to move in some way. “I’m horrible at guessing. Tell me.”

Harry bounced over to Draco’s bed, plopping himself down on his back. He grinned up at him from that angle, upside-down, and Draco felt a few threads of his self-control fray.

“Regulus came back!” Harry said triumphantly. “And he’s all right! And I actually had some Ravenclaws stop me in the halls on the way back—” Draco wondered if Chang had been there, but couldn’t bring himself to ask while Harry was smiling so brilliantly “—and apologize for being idiots like they had been! And so now I know the whole school doesn’t hate me! And this is a wonderful day.” Harry tilted his head back and laughed softly, closing his eyes as he did so.

Abruptly, before Draco could even react to him sounding as if he’d put exclamation marks after every single one of his sentences except possibly the last, Harry popped one eye open again and smiled at him. “And Regulus said that he knew since September that you were in love with me,” he said. “So you were patient and willing to wait for a much longer time than I thought you were, even if part of that was the potion and the compulsion. I just wanted to say thank you, Draco.” His smile grew wider.

He was smiling, for Merlin’s sake. His eyes were shining, and he’d bounced. His emotions were all but purring.

Draco leaned over and kissed him.

He would have exploded in panic immediately afterwards if he’d allowed himself to explode in panic. As it was, he refused for a single moment to think that what he’d done was wrong. He took his time, neither too long nor too short, and then raised his head and looked serenely at Harry.

That wasn’t wrong. It was begun in joy. It can’t be wrong.

Harry blinked, once, twice, and then acquired a puzzled expression, as though he didn’t know what had happened. Draco swallowed. Well, he might ignore it, I suppose. If that’s the case, I won’t push him.

Harry took a deep breath, and Draco recognized the flare of courage in his eyes that had been visible just before he leaped on his Firebolt and flew at the dragons. Then he lifted himself up into an awkward position, half on his leg and half on his elbow, and kissed Draco back.

Draco felt as if he were spinning down a golden abyss, and so great was his surprise and elation that it was hard to feel half the embarrassment he’d expected. He let Harry break the kiss and draw away, and then watched him carefully.

Harry tilted his head to the side, and studied him back. Then he grinned again.

“I liked that,” he said.

Draco swallowed, and tried to think of something magnificent to say, and realized that he could think of absolutely nothing. Apologies were obviously beside the point, and he wouldn’t have meant them anyway. Asking if Harry had liked it was pointless. Explanations would sound stupid.

Harry said the words instead, taking his hand and gripping it hard enough to hurt. Draco could feel the oddest mixture of emotions pressing against his empathy: the cold wind of fear, backed and countered by a warm one. Judging from the expression on Harry’s face right now, the warm wind was awe.

“I’m terrified of this half the time. That doesn’t mean anything, Draco, and it’s certainly not occasion for you to coddle me.” Harry lifted his head, and his eyes flashed. “And I’m not doing this because I think I owe you for falling in love with me, so put that out of your head if it’s there. I always thought that love like the sun can’t be based on people owing each other compensation for something. It wouldn’t work. I just didn’t think I would ever have that kind of love, or the chance at it.”
He swallowed, then said, “And if that really is within my reach, then I want to strive for it. It’s—it’s easy to say this, right now, when the fear is being kept at bay. I’m sure there are times I’ll tumble and want to hide. You’ve seen them already. And this will probably take a long time. But I promise that I’ll keep on going. I promise you.” His breath came faster, and the cold wind increased, as if he were about to say something more terrifying than all the rest. “I want this.”

Draco had the sense, then, to let Harry give him a quick, nervous smile, climb into his own bed, and draw the curtains shut. It was best not to say more, anyway. It still would have sounded stupid or been pointless.

He closed his eyes, and smiled.

That was all that needed to happen right now.

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**Chapter Fifty: Demands, and Harry Not Taking Well To Them**

*Harry dreamed.*

This time, he was in a place that he didn’t recognize, unless it was another room of the old house where Voldemort had been the last time Harry had seen him. He flattened himself to the ground at once and cocked his ears forward, listening and looking for some sign of Nagini.

Nothing. She was probably dead.

Harry refused to take much for granted in these visions again, however. He slunk forward with his belly against the floor, and twitched his whiskers from side to side, in hopes that his nose would give him some useful information. The scent of the fire, and some sweet, spicy smell that he didn’t really want to think about overpowered everything else, however.

“Evan.”

Harry felt the fur along his spine stand up. *That* voice, he knew. If he ever met Voldemort in person, he wouldn’t need to see him to recognize him—which was good, since, as Regulus had pointed out, he hadn’t seen him in his dreams yet anyway.

His eyes revealed a divan ahead now, with its back to him, as usual. The fireplace was in front of that, sending dim light and shadows flickering around it. The floor under Harry’s paws had a threadbare rug, with no recognizable design, even though Harry thought his eyes were better in this form than in his human one. Voldemort must be sitting on the divan, and Rosier was standing in front of him, his head half-bowed, as though he wanted to take a posture of humility, but was not sure it was worth it.

“Yes, my lord?” Rosier sounded bored. *Just as he claimed in his letter,* Harry thought, and then reminded himself that Snape had said not to trust anything that Rosier wrote. He stayed where he was, still sniffing for some sign of Nagini, locating nothing, and listening to the conversation.

“I have a new task for you.” Voldemort’s voice all but caressed the air. “My loyal Death Eaters went to prison for me once. I would not have any of them remain there longer than necessary. Contact Greyback. You and he will free Walden and Rabastan from their confinement in the Ministry’s prison.”

Rosier jerked his head up, and his eyes burned brightly. “Thank you, my lord,” he said softly. “That is truly a task worthy of us. You have always tended to reward me well.” Harry wondered if he imagined the unspoken words that followed that sentence: *when you bother to reward me at all.* He paused, then added, “Bella will not be joining us?”

“No,” said Voldemort. “She is quite busy preparing the correct incantations. You know what she wants to do?”

“Yes,” said Rosier simply. Harry lashed his tail. *What does she want to do?*

“I find it a fitting plan,” said Voldemort. “Do you, Evan?” His voice was direct, and cold, and horrible, but Rosier merely laughed as though he could think of no finer play than answering questions from the Dark Lord.
“Of course, my lord,” he said equitably. “It entertains Bella, and Merlin knows that she needs to be entertained.”

The cold voice altered. “I will not have you making fun of the others this time, Evan. We are not numerous enough that we can afford to lose anyone, on a mission or at any other time. Do you understand me? There will be no more torturous spells practiced on your fellow Death Eaters.”

“Oh, of course,” said Rosier. Harry scraped one paw across the floor. *Even I can hear the mockery in his voice. How is it that Voldemort does not hear it?* “Our mission is different this time. Your most elaborate plans are going forward, and we must adapt our tactics to those plans. This time, you intend to win the war, and to kill the Potter brat who foiled you before.”

Perhaps it soothed Voldemort to have his own schemes repeated back to him, because he said a moment later, “That is it exactly. Yes. Go, Evan, and when you are finished, then return at once with Walden and Rabastan. I will need to speak with them about future raids. There are books I want, which are currently under the protection of those who will not deign to give them to me freely.” Harry heard anger that could crack stones in those words.

“And Greyback?” Rosier asked.

“The next full moon is not for several days,” said Voldemort. “That should give him time to position himself. The north, Evan. It is time that some of our enemies learned the cost of defying me in secret.”

“Of course,” said Rosier, a deep delight in his words. He started to step around the divan.

Harry decided the conversation must be done, and prepared to withdraw, brain whirling with all the information he had learned. But he paused when he realized that Rosier had indeed come around the divan—and was looking directly at him. Harry froze, his heart loud in his ears.

Rosier saw him. His eyes widened, and then narrowed, and then he opened his mouth. Harry prepared to tear his way out of the dreamscape.

Rosier shut his mouth again, tossed Harry a wink, and then kept walking. Harry cringed back to avoid touching his robes, staring after him the while.

*What is he playing at? He obeys the orders of his lord eagerly enough. Can he really want me free to roam the connection between Voldemort and me, just so that he can have some entertainment?*

Then Harry told himself to forget about that. *Rosier and Greyback are going to hit the Ministry,* he thought, even as he scrambled back into the darkened part of the room, further from the divan, and tugged against the bond that tied him to Voldemort, trying to wake up. *I don’t know if I can firecall in time. I certainly can’t owl. And I don’t know where the prison is.*

*I’ll fetch one of the Aurors guarding the school instead. It’s the best plan.*

At last, the bond parted like raveled rope, and the vision rained down in pieces around him, allowing him to wake in his own bed.

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Harry blinked stupidly for a moment. Luckily, that didn’t last very long. He leaped to his feet and dashed for the door. Since he wasn’t going into the Forbidden Forest, he didn’t bother with robes and warming charms. They would only take precious moments that he didn’t have.

“What the hell—” somebody was already saying, but Harry ignored whoever it was as he shut the door behind himself and slid as fast as he could down the stairs to the common room. His scar was pouring blood into his eyes, and there was the usual headache, almost unnoticed by now. He didn’t know why Draco hadn’t come into this dream, perhaps simply because he hadn’t woken up in time, but they could discuss it later. Everything would have to wait until later, or at least until after he had warned the Ministry.

He became aware of a buzzing noise near his ear, and frowned. As he opened the door to the common room and plunged into
the corridor beyond, he whispered, “Claudo inimicum.” It wasn’t a very powerful spell, but it sounded as though someone had sent a tracking charm along with him. This wouldn’t have to be very powerful to contain something like that.

A jar formed in the air beside him and shut firmly around the thing buzzing next to his ear. Harry turned and caught it, then stared as he saw a beetle crawling around the inside of the glass.

No time. Harry shook his head, stuffed the jar down the pocket of his robes, and then pulled up a map of the school in his head. *Tonks is patrolling the entrance hall tonight. She’s closest.*

He took the stairs from the dungeons two at a time, and slid out into the open, glancing around frantically. He grimaced when he realized that Tonks was nowhere in sight. *Did she trip over something and hit her head again?* he wondered. That had happened three times in the last week alone.

He narrowed his eyes as he thought some more about it. *Feverfew’s on the second floor.* He took off again, and then someone grabbed his shoulder and nearly earned himself an early death.

Harry turned with a sharp hiss, only to see Snape behind him, his arms crossed and his gaze stern.

He didn’t say anything, perhaps because his eyes had caught sight of the blood on Harry’s face. “What do we need to do?” he asked. “What are the requirements of your vision?”

“Voldemort’s sending Rosier and Greyback to the Ministry prison,” said Harry. “I need to find an Auror to let the Ministry know, but I can’t tell where anyone is.” He darted a glance around, just in case Tonks appeared out of a corner, and wound up shaking his head. “I’m going to Feverfew. Come on.”

Snape said nothing to dispute him, but glided swiftly at his right shoulder as they made for the stairs. Harry realized, uneasily, that the school was more silent than he had ever dreamed at night. Of course, most of the time he was outside the castle if he was awake now, but still, it was disconcerting.

The stairs cooperated, for once, and they came out on the second floor without being forced to backtrack. Harry’s mind kept trying to calculate times and distances the while, and kept giving up. Without an idea of where the Ministry prison was and how heavily warded it was, he had no idea when Rosier and Greyback might get there and manage to break in.

Harry risked a call down the corridor, since not many people actually lived on this floor. “Feverfew!”

No answer. Harry shot a glance at Snape, whose eyes were narrowed, and who cast a spell that Harry didn’t recognize, but which made his wand glow red. Snape cursed a moment later.

“What?” Harry demanded, thinking again. Haverbull was patrolling the third floor, if they really had to go that high.

“Feverfew is incapacitated, wherever he is,” said Snape shortly. “Asleep or injured—enough that he cannot respond to us.”

Harry stiffened. “And you think Tonks is—“

“Almost surely the same way, yes.” Snape was staring into the shadows the torches cast now, looking as if he would like nothing better than to bring the walls down. “I presume it will do us little good to go to Mr. Haverbull and the others. Whoever did this would not be stupid enough to miss any of our happy crew of Aurors.” His voice was thick with disgust.

Harry took a deep breath. “Second best plan, then,” he said, and turned to Snape. “Do you think that I could firecall Scrimgeour from your rooms?”

“You may do it from mine, Mr. Potter.”

Harry jumped, and then turned around. Professor McGonagall stood behind him, her eyes narrowed and a candle in her hand. Around her ankles twined the blue line of a ward, purring like a cat when Harry glanced at it.

“Quickly now,” she added, when both Harry and Snape stood there. “I felt something wrong earlier this evening, when the wards began to whine. However, they could not tell me the nature of the threat.” She frowned. “Or perhaps I am not attuned enough to them to read it.”
“And Dumbledore?” Harry asked, sliding around her and towards the door of her private rooms.

“I do not know,” said McGonagall. “When I approached the Headmaster’s office, I saw a dark figure moving down the corridor. I turned to chase it, and lost it on the third floor. I can confirm that I saw no sign of Auror Haverbull.”

Harry nodded shortly, and then went into her rooms. They were bright and warm and cheerful, as he saw out of the corner of his eye, but he didn’t care about anything in them now, save for the fireplace. He took a pinch of Floo powder from the dish on the mantle and cast it into the flames. “Minister of Magic’s office!” he called out.

For a moment, the flames danced with a bright green color, and then they tossed the Floo powder abruptly out of the fireplace. Harry coughed and covered his face as he was dusted with it. He whirled around, not caring that he was making a mess of McGonagall’s carpet. “What happened?” he demanded. “Is that what happens when the Minister’s office has its Floo network shut?” He supposed he should have anticipated that. It was the middle of the night, after all.

“No,” said McGonagall, her face pale. “That’s what happens when someone has blocked a fireplace from accessing the Floo Network altogether.” She strode over and stared into her hearth as though she could see the problem from here and know how to fix it.

Harry cursed, ignoring the way both professors said, “Potter!” practically as one being. “Someone’s blocked the Floo Network and taken down the Aurors, then,” he said. “That leaves Apparating to the Ministry, maybe—”

Snape’s hand descended and clenched on his shoulder. “You are not going anywhere, Harry,” he said, in the voice that made it seem less like an order than a declaration of fact. “There are few areas in the Ministry that are not warded against Apparition, and I do not think that you can picture any of them clearly. I will not have you splinched.”

“But I have to warn Scrimgeour,” Harry argued, tilting his head back and glaring at Snape. He saw his guardian flinch, and wondered why.

Perhaps he doesn’t like to see my face bleeding. I don’t know why. It’s not like it doesn’t do this all the time.

“You may do so by owl post,” said Snape.

“That’s too late—”

“Harry.” McGonagall stepped in front of him. “How did you get this information?”

Harry sighed. I should have known she would demand to know that sooner or later. “Sometimes I have visions of Voldemort,” he said. “In this one, I heard him ordering Rosier and Greyback to attack the new prison the Ministry’s built.”

“Then warning the Ministry would not do much anyway,” McGonagall told him quietly. “It would take some time for them to alert the prison, if what I have heard is true. It is deliberately kept at a distance from the Ministry, warded and made nearly inaccessible. In fact, Rosier and Greyback—” she grimaced as if she’d swallowed something foul when she said that name “—may not be able to find it. I know that Minister Scrimgeour has concealed its location from all but those who most need to know.”

“Rosier will find a way if anyone will,” said Harry, and then hesitated, wondering if he really wanted to tell Professor McGonagall about his duels with Rosier.

Snape knelt down in front of him and made Harry look at him with a steady, penetrating gaze. “Harry,” he said. “You cannot let your enemies convince you of their omnipotence. Rosier is playing a game. He always does that. I find it far more likely that, as Minerva said, he will be baffled by the wards around the prison and fail in this mission. What we should be concerned with now is the safety of the school. Do you fail to remember that a person, perhaps people, has managed to take down trained Aurors inside the school and block the Floo Network?”

Harry let out a slow sigh, then froze as Regulus said in his head, in a tone of sleepy incredulity, Show them that beetle in the jar that you captured.

“Wait,” Harry said distractedly, and fumbled in his robe. He drew the jar that the Claudio inimicum spell had created out and held it up to the light. The beetle crawled determinedly around the inside of it, as though determined to find a crack in the glass that would allow it to break out. The insect didn’t look like anything special, save for a faint spectacle-shaped marking
around its antennae, but Harry could remember other times when a beetle had buzzed by his head, and he thought that might have something to do with this. “Professor McGonagall. I caught this beetle as I was coming out of the Slytherin common room. Do you know what it is? Someone’s unregistered Animagus form, maybe?”

The Transfiguration professor nearly snatched the jar from his hand. She examined it, and then let a sharp frown pull her lips into a pursed line. “Indeed, Mr. Potter,” she said, and then placed the jar on the floor, Vanishing the glass. The beetle made a bid for freedom at once.

McGonagall snapped out a complex incantation that Harry couldn’t follow half of. A sharp flash of light eclipsed the beetle’s fleeing form, and the next moment, Rita Skeeter collapsed heavily to the floor. Her clothes were in disarray, her glasses almost coming off her face.

Harry narrowed his eyes. Damn, I should have known. She was in the interrogation room when Fudge and Umbridge questioned me. No wonder she could know exactly what went on there.

McGonagall loomed above Skeeter, her wand unwavering. “You will explain yourself,” she said, apparently needing no help in recognizing the other woman. “How did you get inside the school?”

Skeeter gave Harry a pleading look. Harry only stared back. Their deal had not covered anything like this. Skeeter pasted a sickly smile on her face and turned around to look at McGonagall again.

“Did you know an unregistered Animagus can get inside the Hogwarts wards if carried against a student’s skin?” she said. “Quite a discovery, that one. I rode against Mr. Potter’s neck, usually.” She made her voice into a stream of bright chatter as she looked around the room. “You live differently than I always thought you did, Professor. Gryffindor colors everywhere and only that, I was thinking. But you’ve done a nice job of—"

“Did you put the Aurors to sleep and shut off the school’s Floo Network?” McGonagall asked levelly. “Answer me before I Transfigure you into an egg and step on you.”

Harry had to duck his head to hide a grin.

“No!” Skeeter all but squeaked. “Of course not! I didn’t even know something was wrong until I heard you talking about it!” She shrank back into a smaller pile, her eyes wide and her hands quivering. Harry wondered if they were twitching because she wanted a notebook and quill. Skeeter’s reporter’s instincts were still strong. She would write about this if she could.

That led to another idea.

“Did you see who did it?” he asked.

Skeeter sighed and turned to face him, shaking her head mournfully. Harry might have believed her sad expression if he didn’t know her at all. “No. I was with you the entire evening. You’re usually the center of the action,” she added.

Harry just rolled his eyes. “I suppose you know that this means we’ll have to renegotiate our bargain,” he said.

“Bargain?” asked McGonagall.

“Rita and I made a bargain,” said Harry, his anger growing slowly as he remembered all the things and actions he wouldn’t have wanted observed by anyone. “Didn’t we, Rita? I said that I would feed you stories, and in the meantime, you’d consult me about the way you wrote them. There was absolutely nothing in there about you spying on me and getting fresh stories that way. And there was certainly nothing in there about you being an unregistered Animagus. I think I deserve another bargain. This time, be assured, it’ll tip a little more to my side of things.”

Skeeter frowned at him, but dipped her head. She knew when she was beaten, Harry saw, though doubtless she’d still try to twist the deal as much to her advantage as she could.

“Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, her voice weary. “Do I even want to know why you’re bargaining with Ms. Skeeter instead of reporting her to the Ministry at once?”

“Because she’s useful,” said Harry simply. “Although,” he added, as memory caught up with his present thoughts and
Regulus poked him again, “I really should warn Minister Scrimgeour about this whole mess first, by owl post if I can’t do it any other way. I trust that you’ll stay here, Rita? If I find you gone, I just might have to write the Improper Use of Magic Office after all.”

Skeeter nodded.

“Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, as Harry put a hand on the doorknob, “where do you think you’re going?”

_Is she deaf?_ Harry didn’t bother turning around. “To owl the Minister. I just said that.”

“With an unknown threat running around the school and disabling Aurors and the Floo Network.” McGonagall’s voice didn’t make that a question. “I think not, Mr. Potter. You will stay here where you are safe.” Harry turned around in time to see the wards on the stone begin glowing red and yellow. “Save for the Headmaster’s office, my room is currently the safest one in Hogwarts.”

Harry fought the urge to growl. As important as McGonagall’s assistance had been, in some ways he wished she hadn’t found him. He turned and looked at Snape.

Snape’s face was blank. “Harry,” he said softly, “do you not think that the Minister will want to know how you discovered this? We have yet to think of a convincing lie. Unless you wish to reveal the existence of the visions—” He paused when Harry frowned at him. “I did not think so. Either Rosier and Greyback’s attack will fail, which I think the likeliest option, and the Minister will be warned that way, or it will succeed, and your warning about it would only make you seem to be in collusion with them. Were it not for the enemy being in Hogwarts itself, I would help you to think of a lie, but it is best to stay here. I will not lose you.” His voice was growing deeper as he went on, his face more set.

Harry closed his eyes and forced the words through his teeth and the lump in his throat. “Fine, then. I’ll let the Minister know about the visions. Can we go to the Owlery now?”

“That does not solve the problem of the enemy in Hogwarts,” said Snape.

“Damn it—” Harry turned to the door, and Snape performed a locking charm on it. A moment later, heavy school wards crawled across it. Harry glanced over his shoulder to see McGonagall flaring with red and yellow light. She dropped her hand and gave him a stern glance.

“You are the likeliest target, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Other than your brother, perhaps, and I have made sure the wards are thick and active in his room in Gryffindor Tower. This trip to the Owlery is not as important as making sure that you stay alive.”

“But there could be people who die tonight because of me!” Harry didn’t understand why they wouldn’t understand. He clenched his fists, and felt his rage stir, though luckily it was only ordinary anger, and not the Dark rage that he had put in the prison of icicles. “Rosier and Greyback could find their way into the prison, and kill some of the guards. If not, then they might at least kill some of the Ministry officials in frustration. Don’t you realize that—”

_Harry._

Harry slammed his mouth shut, because that was Regulus, and Regulus might be able to give him some good arguments. _You see that I’m right, don’t you, Regulus? I have to go._ He began gathering his strength to fight Hogwarts’ wards. He’d never tried that before in a room where so many of them were awake at once, but he was willing to try. There were lives at stake, and he could do something to save them.

_No, I think they’re right_, said Regulus. _This disabling of Aurors and the Floo Network has the feel of an attack directed specifically at you. And is it a coincidence that it comes on the night that Voldemort is planning his first raid? No to that, too. Stay here, Harry._

“If someone’s hunting me,” said Harry aloud, “then they might head for the Slytherin rooms—”

“Weard are active there as well,” said McGonagall, with a tinge of amusement in her voice. “When I thought you were safe in your common room, Mr. Potter, I activated them to guard you. You must already have left. But, I assure you, if someone threatens Mr. Malfoy or the rest of them, I shall know at once.”
Harry tensed again. They were cutting down all the reasonable, persuasive arguments that he might have used to convince them. That left fighting the wards and springing to the Owlery. He would have liked to jump to the Ministry itself, but Snape was right: the few rooms he had a clear picture of were almost certainly warded against Apparition, and trying to jump the immense distance from Scotland to London when he didn’t know any unwarded places for certain was suicide.

“Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, and her voice had gone cold now. “Stop that. The wards are already in a weakened state, both from Mulciber’s tampering and from the transfer between the Headmaster and me. What do you think will happen to them if you rip them apart now?”

Harry cursed and spun, creating a wooden figure with a gesture of his hand, and then setting it on fire. He could feel McGonagall jumping, as the wards spasmed with her, but none of the ashes and flames touched her carpet or walls. Harry created and burned a few more figures, just to relieve his temper, and then turned around again.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll stay here. Happy?” He wasn’t, he could feel his heart pounding heavily at the mere thought of people dying when he could have warned them, but he had obligations to others, too. Keeping himself alive and not tearing the wards that kept Death Eaters out when properly attended to were among them.

“Happier than I was,” said McGonagall. Her voice softened. “Harry, you must sometimes consider your own safety first, and leave other duties to other people. Do you understand me?”

Harry understood her. He just hated it, with a violent passion.

He had to do something to make himself useful, he thought, beyond pacing a hole in the carpet or burning more wooden figures. He turned to face Skeeter, who looked as though she were happy to have escaped further questioning. She shrank when she saw his expression.

“Ms. Skeeter,” said Harry, and his voice was all kinds of false politeness. “As long as you’re here, I think we should renegotiate the terms of our bargain.”

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Snape lengthened his stride the moment he was away from Harry. They had left McGonagall’s office near morning, when Auror Feverfew had knocked on the door and asked in a confused voice whether they were quite all right, and if they knew why he had a large bump on his head and no memory of the last few hours. Snape had escorted Harry back down to the dungeons, not letting him out of his sight, and said that he was going to get what rest he could before classes began. Harry had nodded drowsily, obviously feeling the same way.

Harry’s bloodstained face remained with Snape as he waited for the door of the Slytherin common room to slide shut. Harry had not even seemed conscious of the blood much of the time, apart from mutters on its causing Snape’s and McGonagall’s stares at him. He was getting used to the visions, Snape supposed.

I would not have him get used to them.

Snape knew whom he suspected of this business with the Aurors and the Floo Network, and he was not about to let him get away with it.

He was already casting spells when he stopped outside the office of the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor and rapped smartly on the door. He saw no trace of the spells he suspected had been used on the Aurors, but that meant nothing. Karkaroff was Headmaster of Durmstrang. He almost certainly knew and taught Dark Arts that were not common at Hogwarts.

Karkaroff opened the door, concealing a yawn with one hand. He froze when he saw Snape, and that gave Snape time enough to lock eyes with his old comrade-in-arms and bear inward with his Legilimency.

He stood in the representation of Karkaroff’s mind: a deep pine forest, thick with drifting mist. Memories drifted by, not at all guarded, and Snape snatched at the first one.

A nightmare, a dream of Voldemort calling his Death Eaters. With an effort, Snape recognized one of the abandoned houses
they had used as headquarters before the first fall of the Dark Lord. Karkaroff remembered shivering on the floor, having convulsed already from numerous Cruciatus Curses, wondering what he was doing there.

Snape backed out of the nightmare with a snarl, and snatched at another.

A more ordinary dream, a senseless stream of soldiers marching over a mosaic.

Snape snatched himself free of that, and pushed further into the forest, intending to find out whether Karkaroff had any memories of disabling the Aurors and the fireplaces. But then Karkaroff’s mind started struggling, pushing against him, and the cold mist curled around his legs and tried to force him out. Snape knew that he could stay in his place, but not without damaging some of his victim’s ability to remember.

He snapped out of the trance, focused his eyes, and surprised an angry expression on the other man’s face.

“What do you think you are doing, Severus?” hissed Karkaroff. He had crossed his arms, as though that would help ward off the intrusion into his thoughts. “I told you, I no longer serve the Dark Lord. I have not since the last war. What is the meaning of this?”

Snape narrowed his eyes. It was true that Karkaroff remembered only dreams near the top of his mind, and that he had never been a good actor. He would have had trouble concealing his true intentions, if he really meant to betray the school. The memory of the Auror attack should certainly have been floating among the first ones that Snape reached for.

“There was an attack last night on the five Aurors patrolling this school,” he said coolly. “The Aurors here to guard Harry Potter, who, you will know, is my ward. I remember old raids, Igor, and I remember that you were assigned to disable the guards and sentries whom the Dark Lord thought it a waste to kill.” Because you were good for nothing else, his memory added, in silent malice.

Karkaroff flushed, as though he’d heard the mocking words. “And I’ve changed,” he retorted. “Ask your ward if he hasn’t had several conversations with me about this already.” He drew himself up, though that was a ridiculous gesture at this point, since he was shorter than Snape was. “I’ve had fourteen years to decide that, yes, I don’t really like living as someone always marked—or Marked—and ready to run. If the—the Dark Lord is returning, then I will help fight him.” He ended with a shiver, but with his eyes burning with a determination that Snape had to respect, never having seen it in him before.

Snape concealed a snarl. Harry did not mention that he had been talking with him. It explains, at least, why Harry did not mention his name as a suspect at once. He must not suspect him at all.

But why should he not? He is a former Death Eater with a black reputation—Rather like you, Severus?

Snape hissed and wheeled away from the door. He wanted to find something to fault Karkaroff’s story, but his own Legilimency should have told him if the man was lying, and he did not think he was.

People can change in a decade and more.

Snape shook his head free of the thought, which was just a step up from the kind of sentimental nonsense he’d felt when he stood trial before the Wizengamot, and focused on the more important one. That means there is still someone in the school who wishes Harry harm.

“If I find you have done Harry harm, Igor—” he whispered.

“You’ll hunt me down. I know.” Karkaroff actually looked bored as he shut his door.

Snape made for his rooms, despite the fact that he knew he was too tense to sleep. He still had a particularly bad batch of Potions essays to mark, mostly by third-year Hufflepuffs, surely the stupidest bunch of students in the school. Those in fourth year and above had some sense about Potions, those in first and second were too awed of him to be very stupid, but in third year all Hufflepuffs seemed to go quite mad and scribble essays full of nonsense.

They would relax him if anything could, and prepare him to appear in classes.
Harry was expecting the stares that morning. He had dictated the article that he wanted Skeeter to write before letting her go. He marched resolutely to the Slytherin table, appearing to ignore them, but this time listening keenly to the murmurs that raced alongside him.

He took his seat with a faint smile. Most of the whispers were of the “Does he really mean that?” variety. But most of the students here had also seen the Many’s display two weeks ago, and knew that, yes, he was serious. Harry poured himself a glass of pumpkin juice, pleased to notice that his hand wasn’t shaking. Publicity was not so bad if he could control it.

*And I have to do this. Voldemort is spreading his wings. I have to be prepared to do the same.*

“Tell me you don’t mean this,” said Millicent, and slammed down the paper in front of him.

Harry glanced calmly at the headline, which was on the second page.

**HARRY POTTER TO FREE MAGICAL CREATURES**

By: Rita Skeeter

*In an exclusive interview with the Prophet last night, Mr. Harry Potter, already famous for his exploits in the Triwizard Tournament this year, revealed that he has great compassion for the magical creatures of the wizarding world.*

“Most of them are bound with webs,” he explained. “Webs to make them docile, or make them serve us, or keep them from hurting us. Sometimes simply webs to make them stay in one place so that we can look at them. And nearly all the magical creatures I’ve met so far have webs like this: house elves, unicorns, centaurs, Runespoors, merfolk—there’s no end to it.”

*Asked who had established the webs, Potter said that they were ancient.*

“I don’t think it really matters who established them—who’s to blame, that is,” he said. “What matters is getting rid of them. Most magical creatures don’t want to have a large amount of contact with the wizarding world anyway, or they’re open to negotiations about it.”

*Potter should know if anyone would. He freed the Dementors last May, sending them back into nightmares, and obliging the Ministry to find new guards for Azkaban. He also confessed to having freed the unicorns who lived in the Forbidden Forest outside Hogwarts, and added that he considers using his immense power to break webs an important part of his life’s work...*  

“Show him the article on the front page,” Pansy whined, poking Millicent with an elbow.

Millicent flipped back the page, and Harry winced at the headline there, which bore Melinda Honeywhistle’s byline.

**MINISTRY PRISON ATTACKED, TWO DEATH EATERS ESCAPE**

Harry quickly skimmed the article, cursing under his breath. The only good thing was that there had been no deaths. Though no one seemed to recognize Rosier and Greyback as the raiders, they were quite sure that they had broken into the prison, and freed Walden Macnair and Rabastan Lestrange.

*I should still send an owl to Scrimgeour about it,* he thought, and then rubbed his eyes. *Now I just have to remember it.*

“Something to do with you, too, isn’t it?” Draco, who’d just sat down beside him, whispered in a low voice.

“Of course,” said Harry with a sigh. He gave Draco a sideways glance. “Sorry I couldn’t involve you, but, well, it happened rather suddenly.”

“I thought so,” said Draco, and cocked his head, studying Harry intently. “If it had happened slowly enough for you to involve me, and you didn’t, then I would be upset.”

Harry nodded, understanding the message, and the import Draco was giving it. Satisfied, Draco turned to eat his breakfast.
Regulus snickered in his head and said something extremely immature which Harry didn’t bother responding to.

He turned back to the plate of kippers, and breathed slowly. It wasn’t even all the stares coming his way that made him feel off-balance. Events had seized him by the scruff of the neck last night and dragged him forward, and now he felt as if he were in a race with Voldemort, both seeing who could gather allies the fastest.

*And maybe who can keep them,* Harry thought, as he remembered Rosier’s wink in the vision.

*Stop thinking about him. He’s crazy anyway. He only wants you to imagine that he’s important. Which doesn’t answer the question of how he could see you, but then, it doesn’t answer any question about him.*

“Potter.”

Harry jumped. Millicent had evidently been trying to get his attention for a few minutes, because she leaned further forward and frowned at him.

“I asked you if you really meant it,” she said. “If you really want to free all magical creatures.”

Harry deliberately ate a kipper before he answered. “Eventually,” he said. “I think I explained how complicated it was in the article.” He’d specifically told Skeeter to include that, how he didn’t wish to step on anyone’s free will in undoing the webs.

“I know I can’t just run around freeing house elves all at once, for example. They’ll probably be the hardest case, and take me the longest. Except for werewolves, maybe,” he added with a frown, remembering the snarling hatred Remus’s wolf had held for him. “Maybe I won’t even achieve everything I want before I die. But I’ve got a good start, and that means that—”

“And that’s your ultimate allegiance.” Millicent’s voice was flat.

Harry blinked. “Not my ultimate one. One of my allegiances. I do want to free the magical creatures, yes. You knew that. Did you think that I would abandon your family? I don’t intend to. If you need to tell—“

“We thought your ultimate allegiance was to the Dark.” Pansy’s voice was a whisper as she leaned towards him. “Or the Dark pureblood families. They’re your most prominent and closest allies, and you took magic from the leader of the Light, Dumbledore. You’re eventually going to declare for the Dark, aren’t you?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “I see we have a small problem,” he said.

“I was in that meeting, Potter,” Millicent breathed, making sure not a word went further than her, Harry, Pansy, and Draco. “I know that you promised Arabella Zabini you’d never become a Light Lord.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “And I’m going to keep that promise.”

“But then,” Pansy said, “don’t you have to be—“

“Not really,” said Harry, and turned back to his breakfast.

Their eyes remained on him. This time, Harry steadfastly refused to look up at them because he was annoyed with them. I was sure they understood. Millicent should have, after what she heard me say about people being more important than magic. Or maybe they heard, but they think they know better. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected some of the Dark skulls to be any less thick than some of the Light ones.

He finished breakfast and hurried to Potions. He was composing the letter to Scrimgeour in his mind as he went. Not only would he mention Rosier’s and Greyback’s names and warn about Greyback’s possible raids in the north and Macnair and Rabastan’s instructions to go after books—he’d thought of a way to disguise the origin of the information, since Scrimgeour already knew that Harry had a friend called Starborn who sometimes passed him warnings—but he intended to warn Scrimgeour about something else. It was only fair that the Minister know Harry wanted the anti-werewolf legislation obliterated. The article he’d had Skeeter write was a declaration of war, but this would be the formal announcement.

Gazes trailed after him, and so did lingering, rushing whispers. Harry put his head up and rode them all out, pushing away his terror of the attention.
I'm actually looking forward to this, he thought. Pansy, and Dragonsbane through her, were right, in a way. If all of these people give me power, even if it's a fickle, changeable power, they do it by their own choice, and they take it away by choice, too. I ought to use my fame to benefit my allies as much as I can.