Chapter Twenty-Six: Survival of the Kindest

Snape now remembered why he hadn’t cared much about anyone for over a decade. It was because it bloody hurt, that was why.

He stood in his lab, carefully tending an experimental healing potion that was supposed to restore lost bones without the need for Skele-Gro. Behind him, Harry worked in silence, brewing the Wolfsbane required by Lupin and the other werewolves he served with effort they didn’t deserve.

It wasn’t that extraordinary a scene, Snape thought. It could have happened last year. But last year Harry would have spoken to him, now and then asking about the Dark Arts or saying something about his brother or Draco or how unfulfilling he found his Defense and Charms classes. Now he remained in utter silence, not even expressing an opinion when Snape asked him a question.

It was damn annoying.

And Snape knew exactly what he could say to cure the silence. He had only to tell Harry that he hadn’t meant what he said, or that what he had said wasn’t what it sounded like. He didn’t really believe Connor was more important than Harry. Then Harry would glance at him with a cautious look in his eyes, as if to make sure that he meant that as an apology and not a justification. And he would look a little deeper, and nod, and they would be back on the path to their tentative reconciliation—perhaps even a bit further down the road than they had been the night that Harry came back from freeing the centaurs.

The only problem with that solution was that Snape would have to lie. Harry was more important to him than Connor would ever be, and Harry was more important to the war effort than Connor ever could be. And Harry knew it was the truth. It kept the silence between them poised on a knife’s edge.

Snape sliced into an ashwinder’s heart, and shook his head. He knew that Harry believed what he had done—saving Connor’s life—to be a calculated decision, not a sacrifice. But Snape did not believe it so, could not believe it so.

Oh, he had tried. Looking into Harry’s eyes a few days ago, as he lay in his bed and explained himself patiently again and again, he had used a touch of Legilimency to read the boy’s emotions and tried to convince himself of it.

It hadn’t worked. Harry had traded one deep-rooted stubbornness—that he needed no healing—for another—that his healing was already complete. He skirted around any mention of his parents. He went pale when he saw the articles in the Daily Prophet that talked about the abuse, but he always read them, with a morbid fascination that reminded Snape of the way that Lucius Malfoy had looked at Muggleborn students in Hogwarts, as if they were another species. He pretended not to see the sharp glances that followed him, the frightened whispers that trailed in his wake. He had made no effort to convince anyone that they had truly battled the Dark Lord after seeing how many of the other students didn’t believe him.

Snape was nearly frantic with concern for him. Harry needed to—well, to heal. Snape couldn’t put it any better than that. Speak with someone who wasn’t that incompetent Shiverwood, or Snape, if that would make him feel better. Stand up for himself. Stop spending so much time and effort helping the people, like the werewolves, like his allies, like the other students, like his brother, like nearly everyone else but Snape and Regulus and Draco, who took from him without giving something back.

They would consume him alive. They wouldn’t mean to, but they would push their own anger and fear and need at Harry. And he, who had no barriers, no sense of keeping something for himself, would burn out his own fire trying to reassure and help them. It was a noble goal, but it was one that would destroy him, because the need would never end, but Harry’s ability to help would.

Snape knew he could not forbid Harry to help. It would be immoral. And he had no notion of how to restrain the most powerful wizard in the school anyway.

That’s one thing the Magical Family and Child Services books never went into, he thought, and stabbed the stem of a thorny rose so hard it split apart. Snape snarled a silent curse and reached for another one. How to raise your child when he’s magically Lord-level at fifteen years old and abused and refuses to submit to any of the usual punishments intended for children.

There were always the pureblood rituals, but Snape was reluctant to use them. Yes, he could establish some kind of connection with Harry if he did so, but it would be a connection that pushed Harry further and further away from acknowledging his past and healing like a normal child. He was too used to that way of dancing. He wouldn’t achieve any breakthroughs, because the patterns were so familiar, and they would tend to reinforce what he already knew.

Which seemed to leave Snape with exactly nothing, with no more way of helping Harry and keeping him alive than of removing the traps Voldemort had embedded in Regulus’s Dark Mark.
It was enough to drive him quite mad.

And then he did think of something he could talk to Harry about, something not mentioned in that first disastrous conversation when Harry had simply blown away his defenses like a whirlwind. Snape grunted. It was worth a try. Anything was worth a try, when he was cornered like this.

“Harry,” he said.

He felt the silence snap taut, but when he looked over his shoulder, Harry had his head cocked to one side in a listening gesture.

“Have you thought about what you are going to do concerning your scar connection with the Dark Lord?” Snape concentrated on the mixture in his cauldron. If he turned up the heat just a bit, then it should slowly combine the ashwinder’s heart and the thorny rose stem, and that would alter the composition of the potion just enough—if his calculations were correct—to make it restore bones instead of vanish bruises. “I know that he used it to cause you pain during the battle. I think you should shut it.”

He turned around when he heard nothing. Harry had actually put his knife down and was staring at him. Snape felt hope in his mouth like dust. At least that was a different expression than the rage backed by steely determination that Harry had shown him every day in Potions class this week.

“There isn’t a way to shut it,” said Harry.

Snape shrugged. “I grant you that a curse scar binding you to a powerful madman and making you his magical heir is not part of most accepted theories of the mind,” he said, as if he discussed this every day. “But Occlumency might work. If nothing else, it would obscure your thoughts and make your mind harder to reach. Of course, that would alert the Dark Lord, but he is already aware of your connection.” That he knew for certain, having overheard Harry and Draco discussing it one day. It infuriated him that he had to rely on such measures to learn anything about his ward’s life, but he would not let the fury take him. He breathed out instead, and patiently fixed his eyes on Harry’s face. “I think it worth a try.”

Harry’s face took on that particular contemplative expression Snape had learned to fear. He was measuring himself against the needs of others, and the others had always managed to win.

He said that he is thinking now. He said that things are different. Snape grabbed his impatience with both hands and held himself still. Perhaps he will see that shutting this link is the best course for him. It would mean better sleep at night and less danger of dragging Draco into his mind, and he must see how beneficial that would be.

“I don’t know all the ramifications of how the link has changed yet,” said Harry quietly. “I know that it has changed since his resurrection, at least.” He rubbed the stump of his left wrist. Snape wondered if he realized he was doing it. “He sent me a vision much more like a dream than the normal ones to alert me of the attack on the Weasleys, and the same kind of vision to show me the beach. I think those are under his control. And I can’t affect people or things in the visions anymore. I’ve tried. Once, I managed to kill Nagini, but now I can’t touch anything.”

“Those sound like arguments in favor of shutting the link,” said Snape. “Then he cannot hurt you.”

Harry shot Snape an irritated glance. “And we would lose valuable information on the war,” he said. “It’s true that I mistook the place of his last attack, but that was my own stupid fault. At least we did know there was going to be an attack on the autumnal equinox, and it wasn’t a complete surprise. I have to have the link open.”

Snape picked up his wand and waved it at the cauldron, lowering the flame to a simmer. He was going to keep his fury out of his voice, he really was, but he had to strive hard to achieve that. This was his old fury at Lily Potter, or tied to his rage at her. All Harry said now was a direct consequence of her training. I have to have the link open.”

Harry’s gaze sharpened. “Here we go again,” he said, with a disgust so deep in his voice that Snape actually flinched. “You’re going to say something about my life being more important than—which this time? Being prepared for the war, maybe? The lives of my allies?” He shook his head and snorted. “I thought you would at least approve of this decision, since I’m making it out of concern for the war and not for my brother. But it would be too much to ask for your approval right now on any topic, I see.”

Snape could hear the pain underlying his voice as he glanced away, another emotion Harry hadn’t shown much of in the past week.

“Harry,” Snape used his gentlest tone, both because he needed it right now, and because Harry would find it harder to block that out. “I meant what I said. I do consider you more important than your brother, yes—important to me. I did not mean that I believe Connor—” the name felt strange on his tongue “—should have died in your place. I meant that you should find methods that
would preserve both your lives. And I mean you to concentrate on offensive strategizing in this war, not defensive. I wish you to care more about yourself. You are not only a war leader, not to me. But even if I thought of you that way, then yes, I would think your health more important than any one piece of information.”

Harry shut his eyes. Snape could see a fine tremor making its way through him. He could only wait. Harry would turn to him, or he would not.

Harry turned away instead.

Snape shut his eyes. Then he heard Harry say, “I’ve finished the Wolfsbane Potion. I’m taking the vials to the Owlery with me, to send to the werewolves who need it—and several to Remus, of course. Good night, sir.”

When the door to the lab had shut, Snape opened his eyes, and sighed. *So now he’s decided to turn non-confrontational. But that won’t solve our problems, any more than it will solve his lingering abuse.*

Glancing by habit at Harry’s work area, Snape paused when he realized the boy had left one vial behind. He swept over to pick it up, secretly glad to have the opportunity to pursue Harry and call him back.

He paused when he held the glass tube, however. The potion within didn’t have the color or consistency of Wolfsbane. In fact, it looked much more like the most common healing potion for bruises, the kind that Madam Pomfrey was always running out of in the hospital wing.

Come to think of it, there had seemed to be several extra vials of the potion in Snape’s cubby this week.

He was mystified for only a moment. Then he just barely resisted the temptation to break the vial against the worktable.

Harry was making him the healing potions—a tedious task Snape preferred not to have to do himself, for all its necessity—in return for Snape’s letting him use the ingredients for Wolfsbane. He was doing it so that he wouldn’t owe his guardian anything.

Harry, quite literally, seemed to want nothing from him.

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Harry could feel his shoulders tense as he walked into the meeting of the dueling club, now held in one of the abandoned classrooms. It was pouring down rain outside, more than enough reason to stay in. But this classroom was full of people staring at him.

And that’s different from the rest of Hogwarts, how? Harry put up his head and pasted a deliberately haughty expression on his face, taking time to meet the eyes of the students who sat in a semicircle of desks nearest the front—all of them closer friends than half the people here. Hermione gave him a small smile. Connor, hand-in-hand with Parvati, also smiled, though his girlfriend didn’t. Neville, with dirt still under his fingernails from helping Professor Sprout in the greenhouses, waved. Millicent gave a single firm nod.

And then Draco was there, striding up to Harry’s side with a glance that asked not, “Am I late?” but “How could you have started this early, without me?” Harry felt himself relax completely. He moved closer to Draco, asking without words, and received a gentle brush on his shoulder from one hand already outstretched to touch him.

You knew this was going to happen, Harry thought, a more rational, bracing thought than he’d been able to have when Draco wasn’t there. *You had to have known it from the day the negative newspaper stories began.*

And he had known it, he could tell himself now. He still didn’t know exactly who “Argus Veritaserum” was. But he had known the mysterious reporter had it in for him, and he had known that, at some point, he would claim that the accusations of child abuse against Harry’s parents and Headmaster Dumbledore were completely made up, without foundation—that Harry had in fact turned on his loving guardians, the ones who had tried to stop him misusing his magic from such a young age, out of spite and inherent tendencies towards becoming a Dark Lord.

It was only a story, Harry reminded himself. It wasn’t true. The people who believed it to be true must have their reasons for doing so, and he couldn’t blame them for having those reasons. The mere thought of falsely accusing someone of child abuse made him flinch. For that matter, the thought of what could happen to Dumbledore and his parents with the accusations being true made him want to curl up into a ball a few times each day.
He had no reason to feel as though there were a lead weight pressing on his chest each time he met someone’s eyes and saw questions about the truth there. He knew the truth. What did it matter? Why was he letting the stares and the whispers and the outraged hisses get to him?

Well, he didn’t know why he was, but it would have to stop. He had a dueling lesson to begin, and today they were starting Dark Arts.

He waited a few more minutes, both to listen to Draco’s quick recitation of an amusing incident at dinner after Harry had left and to make sure no one else would show up. He noticed that Margaret Parsons, who sat in the back of the room, was watching him with less animosity than usual. In fact, she grinned at him several times, and burst into giggles with her friends more than once. Harry shrugged it off. Perhaps she’d decided that the story in the Prophet today was funnier than anything.

At last, he decided that some of the regular attendees were either busy or hadn’t got permission from their parents to be in a class where Dark Arts were practiced, and held up his hand. The door swung itself shut and locked. A few students began murmuring anxiously, but Harry silenced them with another gesture, though that one had no magical force behind it.

“I’m about to show you a few Dark curses,” Harry said softly. “I don’t want them to get into the corridor, either on purpose or deflected, and I certainly don’t want anyone hurting anyone else.” He glanced at Remus, standing casually in a corner. Remus smiled back, reassuring him he was doing all right with his introduction to the Dark Arts so far. Relieved he was there to heal anyone who did get injured, Harry returned his gaze to his students. “Remember what Professor Merryweather says about these types of curses. Some of the defense against them has to come from inside. If you take too much pleasure in them, surrender your will too completely, then it won’t matter if you deflect them when an opponent hurls them at you. They’ll still infect you with the desire to practice more and more.”

“I’m sure you know that intimately, don’t you, Potter?” Susan Bones asked, frowning at him.

Harry simply gazed back at her without answering, until Susan lowered her eyes and blushed. Harry let out a calming breath, and told himself it wasn’t Susan’s fault. She must be under a lot of stress now that the Second War had begun. She had lost her grandparents and her uncle and cousins to Death Eaters during the First War. And one of the Death Eaters arrested for complicity in the death of her uncle Edgar Bones—though of course, he had escaped prosecution by convincing the Wizengamot he was under the Imperius Curse at the time—had been Lucius Malfoy, whose son was standing unconcernedly at Harry’s side this very moment.

It’s all so very complicated, and I can’t make it worse. If I want them to accept what I believe, and that it is possible for Dark wizards to actually work against the Dark Lord, I have to accept what they believe. They have their own minds, their own free wills. I can only try to convince and persuade people to follow me, not compel them.

“The first curse I’m going to show you is Ardesco,” said Harry. A few of the students flinched, but Harry shook his head. “I won’t cast it at any of you,” he promised, and then concentrated. A wooden figure, vaguely human-shaped, appeared in the center of the classroom, well away from the desks, and then wards snapped into place around it, the locked chain of Shield Charms that Harry could now perform with barely a thought, to contain the curse in the area with the figure. “I’m only going to show you how to perform it.”

He picked up his wand, and this time Margaret Parsons laughed aloud. Harry glanced at her. Margaret just looked back at him, eyes sparkling. “You’re using a wand, Potter?” she asked. “You really like pretending that you’re the same as all the rest of us, don’t you? The rest of us who don’t have to make up stories about being abused by our parents and fighting the Dark Lord to get attention?”

“Miss Parsons,” said Remus, and Harry heard the werewolf in his voice. “Such language is unwarranted.”

“You’d say that,” said Margaret, “because you’re his godfather, and a Dark creature. But—“

“Leave,” Harry told her.

Margaret shook her head. “I don’t want to. You locked the door.”

“I can unlock it.” Harry flicked a glance at the door, and willed it so, and the door stood open. “Go away. I don’t think that anyone has the right to say such things to Remus.”

Margaret sighed. “Potter, you can’t take a joke,” she said. “I’m sorry, all right? I’m not used to thinking of werewolves as people. I’m sorry, Professor Lupin,” she added to Remus in a singsong.
Harry flicked a glance at Remus. He wasn’t the one she’d tried to insult, after all. It was up to Remus to say if she could stay or not.

Remus bared his teeth, but nodded. He feared his own anger, Harry knew. He would control himself better than Margaret could be expected to control herself. But that was the way it had to be, Harry told himself firmly. Remus was an adult, and she was a child. He had the power to hurt her, to punish her, but that didn’t give him the right to do it if she was only acting out of childish impulse.

Harry then put an arm out sideways, not even looking at Draco, and forced down his wand.

“Don’t hex her, Draco,” he said. “She’s not worth it. And you know that she can’t hurt us, and how volatile Slytherin’s relationship with Ravenclaw is right now.” An entirely unprovoked attack on Montague in the corridor that morning had proven that. “I don’t want this to be the incident that sparks off a war between the Houses. Remus said it’s all right, so it is.”

“It’s what she said about you. I want to hurt her.”

Harry turned his head sharply at that. When he looked into Draco’s eyes, he could see Lucius. And Harry had good cause to know just how vengeful Lucius Malfoy was. He shook his head frantically and leaned towards Draco.

“Draco, please,” he whispered. “I’m all right, too.”

“You’re not,” said Draco. “You’re not, and she’s making it worse, and I want to hurt her. She needs to suffer, Harry.” He didn’t speak loudly, and not even with much anger. There was simply a manic determination on his face.

*The problem with having a possessive, protective, vengeful boyfriend, Harry thought, is that he finds it a little harder to forgive people for being children. “I don’t want her to.”*

Draco snarled. Just in case, Harry added the shimmering, almost invisible line of a ward between him and Margaret, and then turned back to the figure in front of him. He locked the door again, lifted his wand, and said, “I’ll say the incantation and make the wand movement slowly. Then I’ll demonstrate the actual curse.”

He performed the slow demonstration, hearing the scratch of a quill as Hermione scribbled down notes on the movement. Then he faced the figure, snatched up a bit of his anger to funnel through the curse, and said, “*Ardesco!*”

The wooden figure burst into intense flames, consuming itself from the inside out. It went even faster than it usually did. Harry blinked, realizing that his rage must have done the curse good. But then, Dark Arts usually benefited from wild emotions.

He turned and faced his audience, seeing the shaken look on Hermione’s face. And Parvati’s face, for that matter, and others’. They were probably thinking about what that incantation could do to a human enemy. *Well, good. I don’t want them using these spells casually.* “The Intense Flame curse is a good one to begin with,” he said, “because it can’t bounce, so there’s less chance of hitting a classmate with it, unless you point your wand at them. It consumes from the inside, as you saw, instead of flying in a straight line of fire.” He glanced from face to face, and drove the point home, just in case they didn’t get it. “It kills painfully, and almost instantly. Your enemy, if you hit them, often has no chance to resist.”

They watched him in silence. Even Margaret’s laughter had ceased, for the moment. Then Neville stood up.

“Can I try it, Harry?” he asked quietly.

Harry smiled despite himself. *This is the reason he went into Gryffindor.* Neville had more reason to hate the Dark Arts than most, since Bellatrix Lestrange had tortured his parents into insanity, but he was volunteering to show that the spells were nothing to be afraid of and reassure the others. Harry nodded encouragingly at him and conjured another wooden figure in the nest of wards, then moved aside so that Neville could take his place.

Neville stared at the wooden person for some moments. Harry watched his expression change, clouds taking over his usually pleasant face until it was an expression of absolute and utter determination. He wondered who Neville was imagining as his foe. He privately hoped it wasn’t Snape.

Neville aimed his wand at the figure. “*Ardesco!*” he said, the first two syllables firmly, the last with a little tremble in his voice.

Fire bloomed, blue-white and consuming, from the figure’s chest region. It charred only the chest and head before fading, but
Harry was impressed. It was more than he had expected anyone in the class to manage tonight, except possibly Millicent, Draco, and a few others who had been around Dark magic from the time they were children.

More interestingly, he had felt Neville’s power, usually burning at just about average level, soar up around him with dazzling intensity when he cast the spell. Then it fell back. Harry nodded. *That’s why he doesn’t do well in Potions. He’s a lightning wizard—quick burning strikes are his style, powered by emotion. Of course, he’s good in Herbology, but there he has love to sustain his interest. If all he feels is nervousness, like he does in Potions, then he’ll mess up instead, because his magic tries to help him but doesn’t have enough intensity to work with.*

“Very good, Neville!” he said, and Neville beamed at him shyly. “Excellent.” Harry created another two figures, one off to the side and one slightly in front of the first one, and urged Neville off to stand before the second. “Why don’t you practice on that, and I’ll need another volunteer to try and cast *Ardesco* again?” He looked around inquiringly.

Hermione rose to her feet in interest, but Margaret spoke before she could say anything. “Oh, I was supposed to wait longer, but I just can’t.”

Harry looked at her warily. If she was finally participating, then he had to give her a chance—

And then he realized that she’d stooped down and picked up something from the floor. Harry blinked. It looked to be a box of the kind that non-volatile Potions ingredients were usually shipped in. He didn’t understand until Margaret removed the box’s lid and picked up something from within it.

It was Argutus, with his mouth bound to his tail in what looked to be an intensely uncomfortable position.

“I found him spying in my room,” said Margaret. “I thought I’d bring him back to you, Potter.” She smiled at him. “Don’t worry. I didn’t hurt him—not nearly as much as you hurt Headmaster Dumbledore, at any rate.”

Harry choked, his rage rising in him so suddenly that he couldn’t breathe. He clenched his hand in front of him. He saw Draco edge closer with a faint look of intoxication on his face, and realized his magic must be rising around him. A few people looked fearful, but Margaret was too far gone in the bliss of her little plan to be one of them.

“Give him here,” said Harry softly.

“I want you to promise that you’re never going to send him spying in the Ravenclaw girls’ bedrooms again.” Margaret dropped the box and picked up her wand, touching it to the ropes that bound Argutus. She murmured what Harry could just make out as a Constriction Spell, and the ties grew tighter. The little Omen snake couldn’t even thrash. “What were you having him do, Potter? Look for dirty little secrets that you could file more false charges about?”

“Miss Parsons.” Remus’s voice sounded very far away through the haze of Harry’s anger. “I would advise you to give his snake to Mr. Potter. Now.”

“I just want a promise, that’s all. I think he shouldn’t even have the snake, really. It’s against school rules. But, of course, Harry Potter gets to be the exception to all the rules. He even gets to attend Hogwarts after he’s forced the best Headmaster in history out.” Margaret gave Harry a sweet smile. “Come on, Potter, a promise, what do you say? I’d hate to have to cast a pain curse on your precious little snakeling—” She raised her wand as if she were going to do just that.

“*Exsculpo,*” Harry snapped. “*Wingardium Leviosa. Silencio. Accio Argutus.*”

The jet of purple light that sprang from his hand made the ropes binding Argutus cease to exist in the next moment. Then Argutus was floating, so that Margaret couldn’t drop him to the floor, and Margaret’s voice was silenced, and Argutus was skimming towards Harry, landing safely on his shoulder.

Harry turned his head so that he could focus on the Omen snake. “Did she hurt you?” he demanded.

“*Tied me up and made me miss my meals, mostly.*” Argutus twisted back and forth, as though trying to get rid of the memory of the ropes. “*But I am sore and hungry, and she said some of the words in the language my name is in. They hurt me.*”

Harry closed his eyes. He wanted so badly to wound Margaret. What she did to him didn’t matter, he could survive it all, but that she had hurt Argutus, a tiny snake who wasn’t even venomous—

He wanted to hurt her, he wanted her to cease to exist, and he knew that he had the power to do it, too.
And if he used that power, what was going to make him any better than Voldemort?

He could feel the press of eyes on him, sympathetic and fascinated and frightened, and he gave a little sob. The gazes, combined with the sheer force of his temper, were going to push him over the edge in a moment, and Margaret might find herself writhing under the Crucius, for all Harry knew. He’d cast it against Voldemort in the graveyard.

Desire and will rushed together, and formed a new spell, the one he needed at the moment—to make him safe, to make the others safe from him.

“Extabesco plene,” he gasped, and felt the walls of the spell rise up around him, wrapping him in wind, making him vanish. He was still there, of course, but he was hidden—not just from sight, as an Invisibility Cloak or Disillusionment Charm would do, but from all the senses. No one could hear him or feel him, and Remus wouldn’t be able to track him by scent. And his magic was under the spell with him, wrapped and turned inside out. Not even its pounding power would reveal him.

Harry brushed past Draco’s reaching hand, ducked, and ran through the suddenly open door.

He aimed by instinct for the areas of the school where few people would be at this hour, after dinner on a weeknight, and finally found another abandoned classroom. He slipped inside it and leaned against the wall, his eyes closed, his head thrown back. His panting shook him.

He’d almost lost control.

He’d almost hurt another student.

He was sick with himself, and furious, and frightened—especially because the soft twining of Argutus around his neck made him dream all over again about injuring Margaret, making her feel exactly the pain that Argutus had felt, returning curse for curse.

He wished with all his heart in that moment that his dream were real, and he could just be assured that no one would come looking for him unless they actually needed help. He could vanish, for hours at a time. No one would worry. He’d slip in and out of the world, using his magic only for good things, and he would understand everything.

Harry opened his eyes and regarded the shimmer of his magic, visible since it was trapped in a small space with him, with what he knew was a look of loathing. “What good are you,” he whispered, “if you can be used to hurt other people like that?”

“Sometimes a short, sharp shock can be most beneficial, Mr. Potter.”

Harry whipped his head around, and his magic moved with it, solidifying into an arrow that Harry had to struggle to keep from flying. Acies Lestrange was standing in the door of the classroom, staring straight at him.

“How can you see me?” Harry demanded. He was counting on his new spell to shelter him, but it was no good if it didn’t work.

“You cannot fool a dragon’s eyes, Mr. Potter.” Acies walked across the room and sat down on a desk. She wore a fringed cowl about her face, and did not try to meet his gaze. Harry didn’t even know for certain if she was looking at him now, or at a corner of the room. She spoke absently. “And you cannot fool my family’s sense of power. I know what happened.”

“What I almost did?”

“Yes.” Acies tilted her head. “Would it have been so terrible?”

Harry choked. “Of course it would have,” he said, when he could speak. “I would have hurt her, and she—she couldn’t defend herself. It wouldn’t have been an equal contest.” He leaned his head on his knees and closed his eyes.

“You smell of so much pain,” said Argutus softly. “I don’t like it when you smell of so much pain.”

“She fights very well on a plane where you will not even try to defend yourself, that of insults and public opinion,” said Acies. “If you had shocked her or hurt her badly enough, Mr. Potter—note that I do not advocate killing her—then she would have backed off.”

“And then she would have hated me even more.” Harry wondered why in the world Acies, a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, was telling him this. “I don’t want to be the one who strikes the spark that starts the wildfire, Professor Merryweather.”
“Something will be, if you are not.” Acies’s voice were pensive. “I do not know why the reaction towards you is so deep, Mr. Potter. Sometimes I think I know, and then it slides from my mind. I will keep trying to guess.” Then she shook her head. “As it is, she will not remember that you held back from using pain curses on her. She will remember only that you startled and nearly hurt her. She will feel the need to prove herself, or she will grow bold from thinking that you don’t dare provoke a confrontation, and she will increase her torment.”

“I can’t hurt her,” Harry whispered. “And I can’t allow Draco or Snape or anyone else who cares about me to hurt her, either.”

“Why not?” Acies’s voice was polite, mildly interested, as if this were a matter of academic interest to her.

“Because of the same principles that you’ve given us, of course, Professor.” Harry frowned at her. “Because we need to understand and respect other people’s sacrifices. The loss of Headmaster Dumbledore was a sacrifice for her family and for her. She’s only acting like this because of that. How can I blame her for that?”

“Defending yourself and blaming her are two different things.” Acies leaned forward. “It is not often used, because to do so would spark rivalries between powerful students that Hogwarts does not need, but there is a stricture in the books of the school that gives professors a certain—ability. I grant you formal permission to defend yourself with magic outside of class, Mr. Potter. What you do with that permission is up to you.”

Harry closed his eyes. “You shouldn’t be showing favoritism like that, Professor Merryweather.”

“I am not the Head of a House,” said Acies. “More, I am the Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, which already has a relaxation of rules associated with it. This is not favoritism, Potter. This is the removal of a restriction that will let you carry the battle to a field where I know you excel.”

“But I should learn to be more patient——“

“There is a certain point,” Acies interrupted him, “at which patience, forgiveness, mercy, forbearance, are all weaknesses, Potter—not invitations to your enemies to do whatever they like, under the sure and certain knowledge that you won’t strike back. I believe this permission will prevent confrontations. I have the Headmistress announce it tomorrow. It will give students a reason to think twice before attacking you, verbally or magically. And if you ignore your own emotions and instincts long enough, the explosion, when it comes, will be more violent. You saw that today.”

Harry sighed. He still didn’t like it, since it was a privilege that elevated him above others, but he didn’t think he had the energy to persuade Acies out of it right now. And maybe she was right, and it would prevent people from getting into confrontations, which would insure that he wouldn’t hurt them.

“You are like me, Potter,” Acies said, making him look up. “As much magical creature as wizard. Lords, or those with the power to become so, often are. Your magic needs to be exercised, trained, controlled, used. It is a part of you as much as your limbs and your eyes, rather than something extra, as it is for some wizards. Better to use it in constant small spells rather than dam it up and have it come out in a flood.”

Harry nodded. Snape had told him something similar during the summer between his second and third year, when his magic had first begun bursting free of the phoenix web.

He was sick of thinking and talking about himself, though, and he asked, “What do you mean, like you?”

Acies cocked her head. “Why, I have the dragon within me, Mr. Potter,” she said. “The wildness. It begins to burn and beg for release if I ignore it too long. And yet, each time I use it, the balance in my mind slips a little more, and the dragon becomes a little stronger.” She stood up and walked towards the door.

“What happens when the balance tilts from human to dragon?” Harry asked her back.

Acies glanced over her shoulder. “Then I will not come back,” she said gently, and shut the door behind her.

Harry closed his eyes. His magic hummed around him, and Argutus asked for crickets.

Like it or not, I can’t just fade. The spell is a nice compromise for when I absolutely need it, but Draco will be frantic about me, and Remus and Connor will be worried. And Snape, too, I suppose.
Harry sighed, and dismissed the cocoon of spells around him. His magic at once uttered a trilling song of freedom, gliding around him so happily that Harry shook his head.

*I suppose I really haven’t used it enough lately. Draining Voldemort’s power is passive enough not to count.*

Harry took several deep breaths, then rose to his feet and turned to seek out Draco. Perhaps Acies was right, and the ability to use magic to defend himself if necessary would make larger spells *unnecessary.*

Harry could think of something that would be even better as far as exercising his impatient magic, though.

*Time to take the battle with Voldemort on the offensive.*

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**Chapter Twenty-Seven: Becoming Conscious**

Harry went up on his broom early the next morning, long before anyone else awoke, long before Draco would have a reason to expound on revenge plans against Margaret that Harry was determined not to honor.

He had to think, and the sky was the best place for it. Harry rose steadily, his hand and legs locked around the Firebolt. His magic hovered around him. If he slipped due to his lack of a left hand, it would be ready to aid him, but Harry didn’t think he would slip. He wasn’t chasing a Snitch, after all, and had no reason to stretch out his right hand to grasp at the air.

He soared until he was gasping, the thin, cold air cutting at his cheeks. Then he turned and glanced down at the bulk of the castle, the Forbidden Forest—an undifferentiated dark mass at this point—and the Quidditch Pitch. Several thousand feet below him, Harry thought, dizzily. The problems in Hogwarts still existed, of course, but their presence in his mind felt diminished, as though the size of the sky were eating them, even as distance ate the buildings that loomed over him when Harry walked among them.

He had to think. Here, where he was alone and the sky sang around him and the muted exhilaration that always came with flying gripped him, was the best place.

Harry closed his eyes, leaned out along his broom, and began to circle. He murmured a warming charm to protect himself from the cold air when that got to be distracting, forcing his thoughts to turn to inner and not outer discomfort.

What did he have to do?

Well, one thing was fairly obvious. Something about Margaret. Remus had taken one hundred fifty points from Ravenclaw for fighting, tormenting another student’s pet, insulting a professor, and acting irresponsibly in a room where Dark Arts curses were being used. Harry thought that might restrain Margaret for a short while, but in the end, it wouldn’t be enough—not if fear of Harry’s magic hadn’t held her back so far. And her Housemates had laughed with her yesterday, not stood up to her, so they were unlikely to be much help, either.

*A short, sharp shock, Acies said.*

Harry sighed. And the shock would most likely have to be magical, he knew—both because of the permission for him to use magic in his own defense that Acies would get McGonagall to announce today and because he doubted that Draco and some of the other Slytherins would be satisfied with less than a magical revenge. He’d heard Millicent and Blaise discussing it last night when he finally returned to the common room, though of course they shut up immediately when they saw him. They would defend him unless he showed that he was capable of defending himself.

What kind of spell would make her back off instead of just find some other way of getting at me? *I can’t shield everyone. If she can’t go after Argutus or Draco, she’ll just go after another of my friends, and there’s no way to predict who she’ll choose beforehand.*

A progressive spell was the best course to take, Harry decided at last, one that would advance in stages as Margaret failed to restrain herself. If she hurt him once, only one thing would happen; if she hurt him twice, then the second thing would, and so on. And it had to be something that would embarrass her, rather than physically hurt her. The mere thought of using pain curses or Transfiguring her into a stone statue the way Voldemort might have made Harry squirm as though his stomach were on fire.

*What, then?*
And then it occurred to him, and Harry blinked and smiled a bit. Well, yes, that would be very hard to hide or disguise as anything other than what it is. And I’ll only need to use it if she attacks me. If she’s learned her lesson, or all her Housemates pile on her and keep her still, then it can stay safely in my head.

That decided, Harry moved his mind reluctantly on to the next topic he thought he had to deal with—Snape.

After several minutes of uphill struggle against his instincts, Harry had to admit that the man might have a point. Could he learn anything more from the scar connection? Harry didn’t know. Since the battle, he’d had nothing but visions too brief and blurred to be useful, or ordinary dreams—most of them repeats of the Hogwarts where he was happy. Voldemort almost certainly didn’t want Harry able to find and follow him while he was as severely wounded as he was. Harry could perhaps delve further into the link, but he didn’t know how to do that without dragging Draco along.

*A one-sided barrier would be the best solution, then, one that I can take down if I need it but which he can’t get through.*

Harry grimaced and opened his eyes, to watch a gull making its way through the air far below. His greatest strength in Occlumency lay in shielding his own emotions, calming himself and letting his rational thinking take over—probably a legacy of the box. He had never tried something like Voldemort’s snake, a trap that would block a hostile mind with a permanent link to his from entering. He would have to have Snape’s help if he was going to do this.

Do I want that help?

It didn’t matter if he wanted it. He would have to get it. Harry twitched his head irritably. And that meant he had to come to some kind of understanding with Snape.

Perhaps I did mistake him. Maybe. I thought he was saying I was worth more as a human being than Connor is, which is so ridiculous it doesn’t deserve a rational argument. But maybe he did mean that I was more important to him and the war effort. I can see that. It would fit with what he was saying when I brewed the Wolfsbane. And if Connor is going to be the one to defeat Voldemort—well, I hold that as a possibility, but Snape probably doesn’t. He knows more about my skills and my readiness to fight the Dark Lord than he does about Connor’s.

Perhaps I should ask him to give Connor lessons?

Harry snorted, but kept the thought in mind. Snape was still the professor at school who knew the most about Dark Arts—well, perhaps Acies knew more, but she so far was concentrating more on the philosophy of them, the internal defense against falling into temptation, than the outer defense against specific spells. And for all Harry knew, she’d refuse to tutor Connor, because Acies was like that.

He won’t like it. I’ll have to persuade him, maybe, or offer to do something for him. But I think I at least need to ask. Connor felt so useless in the battle. Harry winced at the thought of the expression on his brother’s face when he’d first seen him last weekend. Connor had smiled stiffly and thanked him for jumping in front of the curse, but the deep sense of helplessness in his eyes was one that Harry could empathize with. I’ll ask Snape.

Well, he meant to make many requests that weekend, including that any of his allies who had useful information about a possible Death Eater location tell him what that information was, so that they could plan an offensive attack on Voldemort. This could be part of the general deluge of requests.

And that left the crawling problem that he’d been trying not to think about, the thing that should not have been a problem but was. That was the weighty sense of outrage and anger he’d felt about the *Daily Prophet* article yesterday, and Margaret’s insults, and the murmurs in the corridors, and all the other little things he shouldn’t have let bother him, but which did bother him.

He knew what Snape would say, could hear the dry suggestion echoing in his head. *Go talk to someone.*

Harry shook his head impatiently. Who was there to talk to? Remus and Snape and McGonagall knew everything; it wasn’t like Harry could say anything new to them, and McGonagall was doubly restricted by the fact that she was Headmistress of the school and couldn’t be seen as favoring just one student. Nor did he want to make them relive what his parents had done to him, or subject Remus to more ugly reminiscences of two of his best friends.

*Use Occlumency to help in that too, then. I think I’m only being affected the way I am because of that abrading I took from Voldemort’s mental venom. Heal myself, get myself under control again, and the pools should swallow my emotions. I’ll get through this alive. I’ve taken worse. And I’m sick of thinking about myself all the time. If I can concentrate on planning an offensive attack and getting Snape to train Connor, it will be better.*
He closed his eyes and gently expanded his Occlumency pools, overwhelming the boiling chaos in his mind under a cool tide. He had to wrestle for perhaps twenty minutes, since emotions kept popping up and poking through the surfaces of the pools, but finally, he opened his eyes, calm and as near relaxed as he’d get.

A thought came to him. Harry indulged himself in it.

*Why not? There’s no one there to see.*

He pointed his Firebolt at the ground and dived straight down.

The wind rushing past him built to a roar with his speed, and the warmth steadily increased as he came lower and lower, into the air stroked by the rising sun’s rays. The sky tumbled past him, blue and gray and polished to a sharp sheen with the rain that had fallen yesterday. Harry heard himself laughing. The joy surged through him, a light mist floating on top of the Occlumency pools, not one of those emotions he needed to restrain.

Only when he pulled out of the dive and circled lazily a few feet above the ground did he realize that someone had been watching him after all. Hawthorn Parkinson stood near the school’s front doors, her hood pulled back and her eyes fixed on him. Harry could feel himself tense, but he shoved the worry back under the surface of the Occlumency pools as well. He nodded at her as if he did death-defying dives all the time, and then pulled his Firebolt to a stop and hopped off it.

“Hello, Mrs. Parkinson,” he said quietly. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Hawthorn opened her mouth, then visibly changed what she was about to say. “Yes, Harry. I have information that you’ll be interested in—the probable location of one of the camps where the Dark Lord is keeping his captive Muggles. And I brought some people with me whom I think you should meet.” She gave a nervous little flick of her shoulders. Harry cocked his head. *I don’t look that intimidating with my cheeks flushed from diving and my hair tousled, do I?*

“I’d be very interested in that, yes,” he contented himself with saying. “I was about to contact you and the others and tell you that I think it’s time we took this war on the offensive instead of the defensive. A raid of that kind would be perfect.” He looked around, but he didn’t think that the others were standing at Hawthorn’s side under Disillusionment Charms, or he would already have seen them. “Where are these people you want me to meet?”

Hawthorn lifted her head and gave an odd sound, half-yelp and half-howl. Shadows stirred towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest a moment later, and six people emerged.

Harry knew three of them, he realized after a quick glance: Tybalt Starrise, his joined partner John, and Laura Gloryflower. The other three, two women and a man, were strangers.

But all three of them, Harry saw as they came closer, were werewolves. Their eyes, darkened almost to the color of amber, proclaimed it, as did their half-flared nostrils. And then, of course, he knew who they must be: the three children of Light families whom Fenrir Greyback had bitten, the three werewolves he’d been brewing Wolfsbane for.

Harry bowed slightly to the male stranger. “Fergus Opalline?” he asked.

The man nodded, a faint smile curling the edges of his mouth. He had a wild shyness that reminded Harry of Remus, or at least Remus as he had been before the Sanctuary. His hair was pale, a white-blond color that reminded Harry of the Malfoys’. Harry decided to keep any remarks on that resemblance to himself, and glanced at the two women.

One looked too similar to Laura not to be related to her. Her hair was a cloud of golden curls, and she had bells braided in and among them that marked her as a trained war witch. Harry stared in open curiosity, certain there was a story there; she was only in her early twenties, and training like that normally took more than a decade. “Delilah Gloryflower?” he asked.

She bared her teeth at him as she sniffed, thoroughly, and Harry wondered for a moment who led their little impromptu pack, her or Hawthorn. Probably Hawthorn, since she’d been a werewolf longer, but Harry could see Delilah challenging her for the position someday—if werewolves were anything like normal wolves, which Harry had to admit they might not be. “I am,” she said. “It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Mr. Potter.” She cocked her head to the side and relaxed suddenly, as if his scent or the power of his magic had reassured her somehow.

Harry turned and nodded at the final woman. She had her head down, but she looked up at him with a jerk. Harry winced as he saw the marks of the bite that tore across her face from the right side of her head. Her right ear was missing, and Greyback’s fangs
had obviously stopped just a few inches short from her eye. She had a cast of features that marked her as related to Tybalt, but the ripping scar and her dark hair separated her entirely. “I am Claudia Griffinsnest,” she said. “And you might as well stare. I owe you a debt I can never repay, and I’ve lost things I can never recover.”

“I am sorry,” Harry offered quietly. He hesitated, then decided he had to take the risk, and flipped his left sleeve back from the stump of his left wrist.

Claudia relaxed almost at once. “Thank you,” she said. “It is good for me to remember that others have made sacrifices, as well, so that I do not sink into despair.”

“I’ll say,” Tybalt murmured. “You ought to hear her moaning on sometimes, Harry. Utterly insufferable, really.”

Claudia snapped at Tybalt. Harry couldn’t tell how serious it was. The bite, or perhaps just her control over her emotions, made her face very hard to read. Delilah put a hand on Claudia’s shoulder, though, and Fergus cast Tybalt a harsh glance, edging towards the two women.

“It is good to see you again, child,” Laura Gloryflower said, and the whole focus of the company seemed to shift and reorient on her. Harry braced himself. He wasn’t about to yield control to her the way he had when they first met in the Ministry. He kept his face cool as he inclined his head back.

“Thank you, Mrs. Gloryflower,” he said. “Is there something specific that you came to see me for?”

“Partly, I came because Delilah is my niece,” said Laura briskly. “But I also plan to join in the attack. I should have been there when you went after Voldemort on the equinox. Alas, a few members of my family still did not see sense about allying with you. Now they have.” Her tranquil face gave no sign of how fierce the arguments must have been, though Harry couldn’t help scanning for it. “I gave them a good scolding,” Laura elaborated. “And I’ve also talked to a few members of Fergus’s family. They’ll be along as soon as Paton Opalline gets over this little fit of sulks he’s having about allying with someone he thinks is a Dark wizard.” She nodded to Harry. “I told him that you were a Dark wizard, of course, but also that you were a Light wizard. He had to think about that.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. “Do you think they’ll join in the next attack that we plan on making?” he asked.

“I think not,” said Laura. “Not unless they somehow manage to get themselves together in the next week, and it always did take Paton longer than that to make up his mind.”

Harry blinked, but his mind had already made the connection. “The full moon is in a week,” he breathed to Hawthorn.

Hawthorn bared her teeth in a joyous snarl. “Even so,” she said. “That’s why we came, Harry. We want to fight on your side in werewolf form. Narcissa pulled the location of Woodhouse from her sister when she tortured her.” Harry noticed that the Light werewolves frowned at the mention of torture, and Laura pursed her lips. Hawthorn ignored that. “I know where Woodhouse is, what it looks like. The Dark Lord used it as a base during the First War. And this should show the Ministry, I hope, that not all werewolves are evil.” Hawthorn snapped her teeth shut on air. “They’re pushing to make the laws against us even stricter, Harry.”

Harry frowned. He wondered if that was why he hadn’t heard anything from Scrimgeour lately. He’d assumed it was due to the Minister not wanting to seem too personally involved in the abuse case in a way that might prejudice the evidence. Well, I will have to write him a letter about that.

“We should summon the others, then,” he told Hawthorn. “It’s Saturday, so I can meet with you all day. I want to create a plan that will maximize everyone’s strengths, or at least maximize the strengths of everyone who’s available to attack that night.”

Hawthorn smiled. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

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It was afternoon before everyone who could respond had managed to gather in the Room of Requirement. Somewhat to Harry’s amusement, McGonagall had not only permitted many Dark and Light wizards on Hogwarts grounds, but insisted on attending the meeting herself. Of course, she’d attended the last one, but that was perforce, since it was in her office. Harry wondered if she did actually mean to be a part of the attack.

*Probably not. She knows her responsibilities, and it would be disastrous for Hogwarts if she died. She just wants to make sure that we’re not casting damaging spells on school grounds, I think.*
The Room had chosen to present them with a large circle of chairs, couches, and divans, rather like the setup when Harry had met with his Dark allies here last Halloween. Harry had appreciated the encouraging message of unity that sent—

A message of unity that lasted only until his Dark allies arrived. They took one look at Laura Gloryflower, Tybalt, John, and the Light werewolves, and sat on the opposite side of the circle. Harry ground his teeth, in particular, at the way Arabella Zabini kept a hand on her wand, eyes shaded and wary, and how Adalrico stared openly at Laura, as if he could not imagine what she was doing here. Laura simply nodded at everyone, inflexibly polite, and went back to talking with her niece. Mortimer sneered when he came in. Burke made a strangled sound. They might not have existed as far as Laura was concerned.

But Harry saw the snarl that wrinkled Claudia’s lips, and the way Henrietta’s eyes lit up at the sight of her scar, and he could just imagine what was about to happen next.

Then Honoria came in and saved the day.

“Tybalt!” she exclaimed, as if she had been dying for the sight of him, and rushed across the room to throw her arms around him. Tybalt stood up and kissed her on the cheeks with loud smacking sounds. Harry knew that most of the people in the room were staring. He couldn’t help it. He was staring himself.

Honoria looked around the room from the shelter of Tybalt’s arms, her eyes wide and innocent, illusions of house elves dancing around her. “This is the perfect place to announce our affair,” she said. “I’m really a man, you see, and Tybalt’s really a woman, and we’ve been secretly in love since we were nine. Sorry to disappoint you.” She nodded at John. “You especially, John, but really, you should have suspected something when Tybalt started wearing skirts.”

John reached up and smacked his partner on the arm. “That’s why you’ve refused to come to bed with me since we joined,” he said. “Horrendous pimples all over your body, right.”

Honoria and Tybalt burst into simultaneous giggles, and released each other. Honoria sat down in the chair next to them, whispering furiously. The silence that remained behind them was gobsmacked, but less tense than it had been. No one was going to do anything for a while, Harry suspected, on grounds of being thought absolutely ridiculous. What did you follow a performance like that with?

More entrances, it turned out. Ignifer eyed the Light contingent sourly and sat on the far side of the circle from them, but at least Harry could be sure that she wouldn’t cause trouble; she seemed more intent, after that initial look, on pretending that they didn’t exist. Snape and Regulus at least contented themselves with no more than a few stern looks at Harry, and suspicious gazes for absolutely everyone else in the room. Thomas came in with a book and attempted to engage Harry in a conversation about something called the Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic, but luckily his wife had come with him, and managed to steer him to a seat without seeming impolite. The Malfoys entered with a nod from Lucius and a kiss on the cheek for Harry from Narcissa. Narcissa took stock of the situation in a glance and sat down beside Laura Gloryflower, pointedly putting out her hand to be shaken.

The real surprises were the last two people to enter. Remus ambled in as though someone had invited him, and immediately sat down beside Claudia. Harry raised an eyebrow, but relaxed when he saw the other werewolves, even Hawthorn, had smiled at the sight and scent of Remus. Remus was, in fact, talking animatedly to Fergus, who began cautiously to answer back.

And then Charles showed up. His gaze snapped around the room at a laugh from Laura, and locked onto her face. A smile Harry had never seen before, deep and wistful, curved his lips.

“Madam,” he said. Laura turned her head at the sound. Harry saw her face fire with a look of joy.

“Charles Rosier-Henlin,” she said, and rose, and walked across the room to give him a kiss on the cheek, the head of a Light family greeting the head of a Dark family in a way that left no doubt they considered each other friends. She drew back and curtsied to him. “You can still smile like you used to. You have no idea how glad I am to see it.”

“Dark Arts don’t corrupt that, Laura, no matter what else they may take away.” Charles clasped her hand and leaned nearer. Harry saw actual adoration softening his face, and knew, as if they had confessed it aloud, that Charles had probably once seriously considered marrying the witch in front of him. “And the Light hasn’t taken away your grace and beauty.”

Laura smiled. “Did you truly think it would?”

“No,” said Charles. “You were too strong for your allegiance to crush you.”
Laura brushed another kiss across his cheek, and then patted his shoulder and walked back towards her own chair. Charles followed her, sitting down in the single empty seat that had been left as a kind of boundary marker between the Light and Dark sections—binding them together in a true circle. Harry smiled at him, and received a slight smile in return.

He stepped into the center of the ring, then, feeling their eyes track and try to swallow him. Draco, sitting on the edge of the circle near Lucius, was looking at him with particular sharpness. Harry reached into himself, drew furiously on that strength that had allowed him to keep going after his mother’s visit at Christmas last year, and didn’t break down in front of their gazes. He looked from face to face, arresting some people in mid-whisper or mid-frown.

“I know what Woodhouse looks like,” he said quietly. “Mrs. Parkinson has put the image into my mind. She said that Voldemort often used it during the first War as a base. It’s entirely likely that he’s using it now as a storage camp for Muggles. If not, then he’ll have it fortified with Death Eaters. I want to take them down on the night of the October full moon.”

“You’re taking werewolves along with us?” Mortimer’s voice soared incredulously. “How do we know that they won’t turn on us and consume us alive?”

“They’ll be taking Wolfsbane, of course,” said Harry. If it wasn’t for the formal promise I’ve made him, I would dismiss him from the alliance immediately. Narcissa claimed he would bring his family in, but so far none of them have made a move to contact me. I think Mortimer may be so much dead weight. I’ll have to study the unbinding rituals to get out of a formal alliance promise.”

“That allows them to retain their human minds, though not their human forms. We can count on—” He glanced at Remus. “Five werewolves?”

Remus nodded, his eyes glinting. Harry smiled. Remus had changed. Before the Sanctuary, Harry didn’t think he would have dared to attack someone in his lupine form. Now, he trusted not only the Wolfsbane, but his own temper in a werewolf body. It was an enormous step forward.

“Five werewolves,” Harry repeated firmly. “A witch trained in fire magic.” He inclined his head to Ignifer, who nodded back at him. So far, she hadn’t said anything about claiming a life debt from him for saving his life during the battle on the equinox. Harry wondered why, but in case she wanted it to remain a private matter, he wouldn’t bring it up now. “Four former Death Eaters in human form, one of them a Potions Master. Several skilled Dark witches and wizards. An illusionist, and one still able to pass swiftly from point to point?” He cocked his head at Honoria, who bounced up and down slightly in her seat as she nodded. “Two Light wizards. And, I hope, a lioness.” He glanced at Laura Gloryflower.

“I consider most of the world as my children,” said Laura. “It is what a puellaris witch must do, to survive a role in public. It will be no trouble to transform once we are within range of the battle, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded, then turned to Priscilla Burke. “And what about you, madam? Can you allow yourself to join us?”

“Not without Auror Mallory’s permission, Mr. Potter,” said Priscilla reluctantly. “I will not inform the Ministry of this attack, because they would insist on supervising it, and, I can see, getting in the way by insisting that you not use Dark Arts. On the other hand, I can’t fight without betraying the oaths I’ve made as an Auror.”

“This is why you should Declare, my dear,” Thomas told her. “Declare for the Dark, and then Auror Mallory would sack you, and then you could fight at our side. See? It’s very simple.”

Priscilla smiled down at her husband. “Tempting,” she said lightly. “But I think not. What I can do, Mr. Potter,” she went on, moving her gaze back to Harry, “is inform the Ministry of the attack when it’s over. If you have captured Death Eaters who require imprisonment in Tullianum, then we can come in and clean them up.”

Harry smiled. “Excellent.” He hesitated for a moment, then reminded himself that he need not be afraid to use his magic in front of his allies. This would provide good exercise for it, of the kind that Acies had recommended, and it would probably impress them, anyway. He snapped his fingers, and the sheet of parchment he had prepared rose from the corner, skimmed over Lucius’s head, and settled, floating, in front of him.

Harry fixed his eyes on the sheet and narrowed them. Hawthorn had let him use Legilimency on her, and he had a very good image of Woodhouse in his head. The trick was transferring that image to parchment, to make a usable map.

“Pingo Woodhouse,” he said, and concentrated intently. The parchment rippled, wavered as if it would tear in half, and then straightened itself out with a jerk. Harry nodded as the image Hawthorn had described to him appeared in outline: a great hollow valley in the mountains of Wales, bordered on three sides by high walls of stone. The fourth side swept down in a gentle curve
that provided the main entrance to the valley, and was covered with thick trees. Harry could see why Voldemort valued the place. It was thick with natural magic—it must be, or Muggles would have found and used it—and eminently defensible from the ground. Anti-Apparition wards in all but a few places would restrict entrance nicely by that method. The buildings that filled the valley, all but one made of stone and covered, as Hawthorn had shown him, with thick wards, stood in a quadrangle that would allow those within them to see attack coming from virtually any direction. The central, wooden building, Woodhouse itself, was worked over with dozens of anti-fire spells. There, Voldemort conducted rituals that the presence of stone walls would have adversely affected.

“I recognize the place,” said Henrietta, her voice startled. “How exactly are we going to attack it, Potter?”

Harry smiled grimly. “By a combination of distraction and air,” he said. He swung around, meeting each gaze in turn. “I need to know here and now who the best flyers among you are.”

“I’m pretty damn good,” said John quietly.

Harry nodded to him, and continued turning around the circle. Draco, of course, was leaning forward, staring at him, and Harry rolled his eyes and nodded. Draco sat back, satisfied. Regulus grinned at him. And raising her hand, as if she could not quite believe what she was doing, was Henrietta.

Harry locked eyes with Henrietta. He did not trust her. On the other hand, it would be stupid of her to claim she was good on a broom if she wasn’t. “And you really want to join me in the air?” he asked her.

Henrietta let out a sharp breath. “I want this attack to succeed,” she said, and then looked surprised that she’d said it. But she went on. “I saw what the Dark Lord—no, Voldemort, was during the attack on the beach. He won’t be good for my family or my ambitions if he wins. And I’d rather be a vital part of the attack than just one more Dark witch in the background, Potter.”

That, Harry could believe. Besides, he was utterly confident that he was better in the sky than Henrietta was. He nodded, and turned back to the map.

“Mrs. Parkinson has shown me that there aren’t spells preventing the approach of brooms,” he said. “Brooms are made of wood, and spells aimed at them would disrupt the workings of Woodhouse itself. But there’ll be guards watching out for us, that’s for certain. We’re going to need a distraction, so that we can ride above them without being noticed. That’s where the werewolves come in, and our lioness. He nodded to Hawthorn, who bared her teeth in what was not a grin. “She knows the country around Woodhouse, and can show the others where to Apparate in before the moon rises. Then they’ll transform and strike in through the forest, distracting the guards from me and the rest of us on our brooms. Since Voldemort’s won’t be there, I can concentrate on destroying the anti-Apparition wards. When they’re down, I want the rest of you to Apparate in immediately.”

“I can carry the message!” Honoria proclaimed, all but vibrating.

Harry smiled at her. “Thank you, but I need you on the ground with your illusions. We have a spell that Charles invented which will let me tell you the moment the wards fall; I’ll teach it to you before you leave today.” He glanced at the others. “What do you think so far?”

“I think that not all of us know Woodhouse,” Burke grumbled. “How are we going to find and free the prisoners?”

“This is why we have former Death Eaters with us,” said Harry. “You’ll split into three groups—one guided by Mr. Malfoy, one by Mr. Bulstrode, and one by Professor Snape.” He shot a quick glance at Snape, whose face had turned pale, but who merely nodded when Harry locked eyes with him. He’s being practical, for once, Harry thought. He knows that he’s not good enough on a broom to guard me. “They’ll be able to show you the likely places where prisoners are hidden, and what traps to expect.”

“You don’t think that You-Know-Who will have set new traps for us?” Tybalt asked, his voice worried. Harry saw him glancing at his partner, and guessed that he didn’t like the thought of being separated from John. “After all, why should he leave them the same as they were, since he knows that some of his followers have turned traitor?”

“The unique nature of Woodhouse restricts the defensive spells able to be used there,” said Lucius smoothly. “The Dark Lord will assuredly have changed some of the traps, but I was frequently at Woodhouse in the last years before he fell. There are few of the traps that I will not have seen.” His eyes flashed as he smiled, and Harry saw just how much he was looking forward to striking back at Voldemort. Of course, Voldemort had sent Evan Rosier to kill him, branded him for life, and done other things to him. “I’ll brief you on those this afternoon.”

Harry snapped his fingers, remembering something he’d forgotten to ask Hawthorn. “Mrs. Parkinson,” he said, recalling her
attention from a quiet argument with Delilah. “Can Madam Apollonis use fire at all, or do the spells at Woodhouse prevent any kind of flame from springing up there?”

“No,” Hawthorn said. “She would not be able to destroy Woodhouse itself—and I would advise you not to try,” she said, with a little bow to Ignifer, “but she can use her flame in other ways.”

“Good.” Harry turned back to Ignifer. “I’ll rely on you to provide us light for the attack, once it gets going and there’s no need to hide any more. The moon will be full, yes, but I don’t want to take the chance of any of us hitting each other by mistake.”

Ignifer looked as though someone had just handed her the best birthday present ever. “That will be no problem.”

“How do you know that the Dark Lord won’t be there?” Burke asked then. From the tone of his voice, he wanted to make Harry’s life difficult, but Harry was grateful for the question, and that it was Burke who had asked it. That man was also irritating, for all that he’d fought when called, and it might impress him to realize exactly what had happened in the battle on the beach.

“I hurt him too badly,” said Harry. “I ripped into his magical core, not just the power that he’d managed to acquire from draining other people. He’ll be furious, yes, but he won’t risk just charging into battle against me—and there’s no particular reason for him to be at Woodhouse rather than any other stronghold.” He glanced at Lucius, who nodded. Lucius had told him in private that he thought it extremely probable Voldemort had retreated to one of his lairs to lick his wounds, where no Death Eaters, no matter how trusted, were permitted to enter. “It’s going to take him at least a month to recover completely. If he’s there, he can cause trouble, but it won’t be on the scale that it was, and I can use my magic for other things.”

“A month?” Henrietta’s voice was lively with curiosity. “How do you know that?”

Harry shrugged. “I do. We both have the ability to drain magic. I felt what I took from him. It’s like estimating the amount of water in a glass. I know how to do it by sight, but I couldn’t tell you in terms of inches from just a glance.”

Henrietta frowned, and then her eyes widened, as though she had just thought of something. But she said nothing, and Harry turned to the other problems that were left—minor problems, since no one else provided a major challenge to his plans. Then it was a matter of making sure that everyone learned the communication spell, memorized the geography of Woodhouse, and did what else they could to insure the attack was a success.

Harry could not believe how much better he felt, now that he was doing something that should result in a substantial loss on Voldemort’s part. He was definitely meant to fight in an offensive war, he thought.

And that was strange, really, considering how long and hard he’d trained in defensive magic to protect Connor.

He shrugged, because thinking about it too much would mean thinking about himself again, which he was tired of doing, and returned to making exact plans for guiding the Muggles out once they’d rescued them.

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Henrietta felt as though someone had torn her broom out from under her. She stared at Potter, this time giving special attention to the lightning bolt scar under his fringe. It made sense, really. And this second coincidence was too great. She felt like a fool for not seeing it before.

Both Parselmouths. Both with the ability to drain magic. And yes, that could be a curse scar from surviving Avada Kedavra. It’s not as though enough people have them for it to be a rule that one of them must be heart-shaped.

Potter is Voldemort’s magical heir. And almost certainly the one who actually bounced the Killing Curse back at him.

That…put rather a different spin on things.

Henrietta tapped her fingers on her knee, only coming out of her thoughts when she needed to learn a spell, contribute a comment that no one else was thinking of, or answer a question. In the meantime, her thoughts spun and eddied around a different picture of the future than she’d had just an hour before.

There was the slightest, smallest chance that Potter might be like the Lords and Ladies she’d heard of in the ancient days, the ones who had treated their companions as actual companions, not expendable bodyguards or arrow fodder. Voldemort did not treat his Death Eaters that way, Merlin knew, and that was one of the reasons Henrietta had never wanted to join them. She was too smart, too skilled, too valuable, to be a pet.
When she’d heard that Potter refused to declare himself a Lord, and then met him, she had assumed that he was also too emotionally weak to be the kind of wizard who could stand up to his powerful followers as an equal, never mind be an actual leader.

But now, if that was not true—

Henrietta whipped her thoughts back into line. She knew what the world was like. She had lived in it and thrived, survived, flourished, because she adapted herself much more easily to disappointed hopes and dashed expectations than other people did. While her year mates still gaped and mourned that Slytherins were treated badly by the other Houses, Henrietta had accepted it and was turning it into a weapon. And while she had listened to the tales of true Lords and Ladies with a yearning heart when she was younger, she knew before she was seven that no one in the wizarding world was really like that, not Grindelwald and not Albus Dumbledore and not Voldemort.

It was stupid to think that Potter would be the exception, particularly when he refused the title. And she was an idiot to be thinking that there was even the chance that he would be different.

But, still…

She had time to think, didn’t she? No one knew she had Potter’s hair. She had set the Polyjuice to brewing, but it would take another three weeks to be ready. And her plan was not the sort that required immediate confrontation.

She had time to test Potter, to ride beside him in this attack, and see if he was a true Lord.

*You know he is not.*

But she wanted to see.

Henrietta Bulstrode had never blinded herself to reality. And if reality had decided to take a sharp turn for the sublime, then she might as well ride beside Potter with sincerity in her heart, for once, and see what happened.

She made the decision with considerable force, if only to stop the struggle in her mind that wanted her to decide against Potter. That was annoying, she thought. Sometimes lately she felt as if her thoughts were not her own, as if someone were guiding, steering, directing them.

She settled the conflict with a sharp shake of her head—she would follow Potter with a true heart for now—and turned back to the battle plans.

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**Chapter Twenty-Eight: Through the Fire**

Harry had a plan for Sunday.

He didn’t like all aspects of the plan. In fact, he was so far from liking all aspects of the plan that he had thought about giving a few of them up. Surely it didn’t really matter if he delayed some of the confrontations he knew would happen. He still had a few days to speak to his brother, and Snape could wait even longer. They were going to fight a battle together. That was the important thing, wasn’t it?

Except that it wasn’t the only important thing. Harry opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of the four-poster, absently stroking Fawkes’s feathers. He wouldn’t have slept at all last night if not for the phoenix’s help. Fawkes chirped twice, once for each caress Harry gave him, before tucking his head further under his wing and lifting one foot to curl against his breast.

*Maybe I should be strong enough to force my mind past this, but I’m not.* Harry gave an irritated sigh and rose; he didn’t think he would get back to sleep right now unless he asked Fawkes for another song, and then he might slumber through breakfast, when he intended to put the first part of the plan into motion. He scooped up Argutus and went to use the showers. The Omen snake lifted his head and flicked his tongue out to catch one of the falling drops of water.

“I thought you only drank cold water,” said Harry, though by this point he didn’t know why he was surprised. It really hadn’t taken Argutus long to recover from the pain curses that Margaret had cast on him, and he had promptly gone back to wandering around and trying new things. If one of those new things was catching warm water on his tongue—well, why not?
“No,” Argutus said peaceably, and then wound into Harry’s hair, which caused a problem when Harry was trying to use his hand and his magic to clean it. Harry settled the Omen snake on his shoulders again and went back to the shower, his mind circling uneasily around the confrontations he planned to fling himself into.

The first one was probably the least problematic. Harry knew that he would enjoy it.

And that was the problem, really. He didn’t want to be someone who would take pleasure in other people’s pain. It reminded him too much of both Bellatrix and Voldemort.

But it has to happen, Harry reminded himself, resigned, and then patiently pulled Argutus out of his hair again.

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Harry shook his head when Draco tried to pass the Daily Prophet to him so that he could see the new article. He would lose his appetite if he read it, and then he knew what the people who loved him would have to say about that. He picked up a forkful of sausages instead, and began eating, well aware of the eyes on him—from the Ravenclaw table in particular.

She’ll approach me soon. I think she would have yesterday, except that I was meeting with my allies all day and she didn’t see me. One hundred fifty points from Ravenclaw aren’t going to do anything to her obsession.

“I want to try some sausages,” Argutus said, coiling down his arm. “They look like crickets.”

“I should find someone to heal your eyes,” said Harry, even as he put down his fork, broke loose a bit of sausage, and held it out to the Omen snake, who happily stretched his jaws wide and swallowed it. “These do not look like crickets.”

“You do not look at things with a snake’s eyes.” Argutus’s tongue flickered, seeming to trail the scent of where the food had been. “It is wrong of you. If you looked at things with a snake’s eyes, if you were more like a snake the way you should be, then you would not hurt as much.” He craned himself around Harry’s neck, leaning forward obnoxiously onto the plate. “More please.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and caught a glimpse of Draco watching him with a faint smile. Harry was glad of that. He’d come back to the common room so late on Friday night that they hadn’t had much of a chance to speak about Margaret or what she’d done, and then yesterday, of course, had been filled with meetings and sending messages and strategizing for the attack on Woodhouse. Harry knew that Draco wanted to speak to him in private, and extensively. That was another of the confrontations planned for today, and probably the one Harry was least dreading.

“Here comes the one who hurt me.”

Harry stiffened, but kept on eating. He would wait for Margaret, who was approaching him from behind, to tap him on the shoulder.

Then he realized that that wouldn’t work, because Millicent and Blaise were casually rising to their feet and turning to face Margaret. They leaned against the table on either side of him and stared at the Ravenclaw. Harry knew hexes would fly in a moment if he didn’t do something. He didn’t want that to happen. Points would be taken from Slytherin, and Margaret would be hurt beyond what she deserved.

And should I even value my House’s points as more important than her health?

Maybe he shouldn’t, but he did. This was the kind of irritating truth that had driven him to plan the confrontations in the first place. He should be strong enough to ignore and put up with all the minor annoyances, but he wasn’t, so he would handle them.

He turned in place, and raised an eyebrow at Margaret, who looked startled. Harry frowned. She should have known I would notice my Housemates’ movements, at least.

Draco, he noticed, kept right on eating. Harry was grateful for that. Draco’s rage would be more dangerous than Millicent’s or Blaise’s.

Margaret did him the favor of getting right to the point. “Sitting at the snakes’ table and eating your breakfast like a normal person, Potter?” she asked. “Of course, everyone can hear you hissing all over the Great Hall. There isn’t anything normal about that.”
“I had a question to ask you,” said Harry, making sure that he kept his attention fixed on Margaret’s face so that he didn’t look at Argutus and accidentally speak Parseltongue.

“Yes, Potter?” Margaret looked absurdly pleased. “Finally realized you can’t find your way out of the Dark on your own?”

Of all things, it was that which made Draco’s fork scrape across his plate. Harry decided to hurry things up before Draco could work his way into the confrontation.

“Did you hear about the special permission that Professor Merryweather’s given me?” Harry looked at her in polite concern. He was aware of eyes fastened on him all over the Hall, especially from the head table. He didn’t look away, didn’t meet them. He had to carry this through now, or Margaret would be cursed within an inch of her life. “That I can use my magic to defend myself, I mean.”

“You didn’t do anything permanent to me when I hurt your snake,” Margaret answered at once. “Why would you do anything now?”

_Acies was right. If I’d hexed her badly enough, she might have backed off. But I can’t regret not using magic on Friday. She would have died, as angry as I was._

“Because I’ve decided that you’re an annoying little cockroach,” Harry answered, “and the only way to kill a cockroach is to step on it multiple times. _Acclaro incogitantiam_!”

Margaret flinched back as the bright pink cloud of the spell surrounded her, then examined her arms as though she expected to find them changed suddenly into flippers. She leaned forward, peering at Harry. Harry smiled at her and turned around to go back to his breakfast.

“Don’t you ignore me, Potter,” Margaret whispered viciously. “Do you really think that they’ll let you stay much longer in the school, you—“

And then she stopped as the laughter began around her, and she heard her own voice, speaking from the back of her head.

“Oh, Merlin, I think my breasts are about to fall out of my clothes! They aren’t, are they? I don’t dare reach up and adjust them right now. No, they aren’t, it’s just that same feeling I get every day. Phew! That’s good. Now, if Michael will just look over here and notice me threatening Potter, then I could die happy—“

Margaret’s face flushed incredibly red when Harry glanced at her over his shoulder. “What the _fuck_ did you do to me?”

“You ought to be able to figure it out,” said Harry lightly, while Margaret’s voice went on narrating how embarrassed she felt. “That spell reveals your secret thoughts, the ones you don’t want anyone to know. It’ll keep doing that for an hour.” He tried to squash his own enjoyment, he really did, but he snickered in spite of himself when Margaret’s voice started going on about how Michael would never touch her now. “The next time you attack me or anyone else I care about, two hours, and the secrets will be worse. And then three hours, and so on. Soon you might have a voice narrating every aroused or angry or ridiculous or jealous thought you possess to an interested audience at all hours of the day. Unless you stop attacking me and my friends, of course, and keep your wand and your hands and your tongue to yourself.” He couldn’t help adding, “That shouldn’t be hard. I doubt Michael Corner will really want your tongue in his mouth now.”

Margaret fled the Great Hall, laughter following her like a pack of barking hounds. Argutus complained on his shoulder about not being able to understand English. Blaise and Millicent sat down again, putting their wands back in their sleeves.

“I underestimated you, Harry,” Millicent muttered in his ear. “That was a fitting revenge.” Then she broke out snickering again. “Oh, Merlin, her and Michael Corner? What kind of dreamworld is she living in, to consider that a possibility?”

Harry shook his head, and glanced sideways at Draco. “Are you convinced that’s enough of a punishment?” he asked.

“Yes.” Draco shuddered dramatically and picked up his glass of pumpkin juice. “For everyone. I really _didn’t_ want to know about Parsons’s sex life, Harry.”

“And you never have to, as long as she listens to sense,” said Harry. He relaxed, his emotions melting into pleasure—half relief that Draco wouldn’t go after Margaret now, and half enjoyment under Draco’s approval.

_“That’s not likely to happen.” Draco sent him a wounded look. “The first time we have to hear her meditate on taking a shit or_
biting her toenails is when I hex you back.”

Harry laughed in spite of himself, and then Draco leaned nearer him and lowered his voice.

“On the other hand, I might not. After all, I think some of your thoughts that that spell might show should be reserved just for me, don’t you agree?”

Harry could feel himself flush, not only because of the words but because of Millicent’s sideways interested stare. He held Draco’s eyes and nodded. Draco sat back, a half-smile playing on his lips.

*If he does want to talk to me after breakfast, perhaps it won’t be so bad, Harry thought hopefully.*

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Sure enough, Draco matched his stride to Harry’s as they passed out of the Great Hall, and turned him gently but inexorably towards one of the moving staircases, indicating he wanted to go upstairs to talk, instead of the Slytherin common room. Harry supposed it couldn’t hurt. There would be fewer people to overhear them if they chose an abandoned classroom, and they wouldn’t have to kick Blaise out of their bedroom, which always made him sulky.

“Here, I think,” said Draco, opening a door and peering into a space Harry thought had probably been a storage room once. Odds and ends filled it—broken chairs, half-severed desks, dead plants that looked like abandoned Herbology projects, torn blankets. Harry wondered who saved things like this, even as Draco steered him inside with one hand on his back. Did Filch really think he could repair them without magic, or had it been one of his predecessors?

“I want to know why you wouldn’t let me defend you on Friday.”

*Well, that’s direct.*

Harry swallowed and turned around, leaning on a wobbly chair. Draco didn’t move away from him, even though a good five feet separated Harry’s chair from a convenient desk where he could have sat and likely had it not collapse beneath him. He stood in front of Harry, and used his height advantage unfairly, staring down at him.

Harry sighed and reached up to stroke Argutus. “Because I thought you would kill Parsons,” he said quietly.

“I wouldn’t have,” said Draco.

“Badly wound her, then.” Harry wanted to turn away and wander among the chairs, to avoid Draco’s eyes, but the chair was just the tail end of a mound of furniture. He had to stay where he was. “You know what the relationship between Slytherin and Ravenclaw is like right now, Draco. Cho and Luna and a few other people are trying, but they’d have to stand by their own House if you managed to hex Parsons hard enough to send her to the hospital wing—”

“Harry.” Draco reached out and gripped his left wrist, his way of insuring Harry paid attention. Argutus, who’d been slithering down Harry’s shoulder to curl around his left arm, protested sleepily. “That’s just an excuse. You know it. If I’d hexed her, you wouldn’t have had to. And I think her own House would have understood, even if it was something nasty and disabling.” He paused, then added, “And I want to know why you ran away, and then didn’t want to talk to me about it when you came back to the common room.”

“I ran because of my own anger,” Harry admitted. “I could have killed her, Draco. I might have.”

“And was there a reason that you put yourself under a spell so that no one else could find you, rather than just getting outside the room so you could calm down?” Draco sounded like Lucius again, Harry thought, not disdainful, but cool, with determination under his tone like steel under a layer of snow. “I would have followed you out, Harry, instead of trying to hex Parsons, if I had any idea where you were. I cared more about comforting you than taking revenge on her.”

Harry winced. “I know.”

“They why?” Draco persisted. “Both for yourself and for her—if you really have to care about what happens to her—it would have been the better course.”

Harry braced himself. Draco already knew about his dream. And he trusted Draco. He could do this. He just didn’t like admitting these things aloud. They sounded stupid.
“Because I wanted to disappear,” he said. “To just stop mattering, for a while. To go away.” He shrugged. “You know, like the dream.”

“You said you knew the dream couldn’t be real,” Draco pushed. He turned and leaned back against the mound of furniture, still gripping Harry’s wrist. “Why did you try to grab it the moment you felt hurt?”

Harry hesitated.

“The truth, Harry. You owe me that much.”

“Because I still want it,” Harry said. “I want them to stop looking at me, stop seeing, stop caring. That means everyone.” He swallowed back the lump in his throat and met Draco’s gaze. “Even you, sometimes.”

Draco snorted, his eyes dark and a muscle jumping in his cheek. “That’s never going to happen, Harry,” he said. “You can make me look past you with a spell, but you can’t make me stop caring about you—except with compulsion, which I know you would never use.”

“I wonder, sometimes,” Harry said. “When I get as angry as I got at Parsons on Friday—“

“You had every right to get that angry at her.”

Harry frowned. “Draco, there was a moment when I knew that I could have looked at her and made her cease to exist by willing it. That’s not a comfortable thing to know.”

“How can you teach me that trick?” Draco asked lightly. “I want to use it on Professor Vector sometime.”

“Draco—“

“I know,” Draco said, and his hands rose and skimmed over Harry’s face and hair and scar, in no particular order, touching wherever he could touch. “You worry so much about other people that that would horrify you. But, Harry, the important thing is that you’ve always had enough self-control not to kill just because you’re irritated. You can’t blame yourself for possessing the ability. That’s what Lord-level magic’s like. You might not like it, but it’s there, and you should use it for other things—like that spell today—instead of just trying to disclaim it. Or run away from the people who care about you and hide under a spell, for that matter.”

Harry nodded, reluctantly. What Draco said made a good deal of sense. Of course, he could be free of having that much magic if he sacrificed some of it, as he had planned to do last year when he contemplated freeing the northern goblins, but then he wouldn’t be able to free other magical creatures of their webs.

“Thank you,” he said, and brushed a light kiss along Draco’s cheek. He had to ask. “Do you think I would ever do that, Draco? Lose control like that and obliterate someone?”

Draco leaned back and stared hard at him. “If you do, Harry,” he said, “you’ll have an excellent reason.”

Harry nodded again. He didn’t have that kind of faith in himself, but Draco’s declaration was solid enough to lean on. And perhaps he could grow that kind of faith in himself, even think he had the right to be as angry as he’d been on Friday.

Perhaps.

He was glad that that confrontation had gone so well, because now he had to go talk to Snape.

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*It’s just a door. Harry frowned at the door to Snape’s private rooms. It’s not intimidating. If you’re frightened of a door, how in the world are you ever going to deal with Snape?*

He shook his head. He would deal with Snape because he had to, but he couldn’t help thinking it would have been easier if the door had stood open, if Snape had seen him already, and he had no choice about coming in.

*Easier, but since when have you chosen the easy route?*
Harry sighed, and knocked.

There was a long pause from the other side of the door, long enough to make Harry wonder if perhaps Snape was elsewhere. But he’d seen him leave the head table that morning just before he and Draco went for their little talk. Snape didn’t usually spend Sundays, even bright and sunny Sundays, wandering the grounds of Hogwarts and singing a merry little song.

“Harry.”

Harry jumped and turned around. Snape stood behind him, raising one eyebrow at—what? Once, Harry would have known. Now it might have been the expression on his face, or the state of his clothes, or his stare.

“Professor,” said Harry. “Sir.” Now he would have to stop babbling titles and actually say what he had come to say. “If you’re not busy, may I speak with you?”

“I have just returned from speaking with the Headmistress about Slytherin’s position in Hogwarts,” said Snape. “My duties as Deputy Headmaster are done for the day, Harry. Please come in.” He reached out and skimmed his hand just above the door, making several complicated wards hiss and spring back, and whispered the password, deliberately loud enough for Harry to hear that it was “Atropa belladonna.” Then he passed inward, and Harry had to follow him.

He’d been less often in Snape’s private rooms than in his office, and didn’t like them as well. There were racks of Potions ingredients in the office, worktables, cauldrons kept specifically for students with detention to scrub, Transfigured chairs, and dozens of other little objects that Harry could put between himself and a gaze or a question that got too probing. Snape’s rooms were more open, the first one having only a couch on one side, near the hearth, and a chair on the other. Snape took the chair, forcing Harry to sit on the couch.

I can’t hide. Damn it.

Harry sat stiffly, not trying to force himself to relax. It was hard enough to be here at all. He was no Gryffindor, but he knew he had courage. He just had to summon that courage, and stop dithering. It didn’t help that Snape remained absolutely still and quiet, apparently not uncomfortable with the silence.

“Sir,” he said at last, fixing his eyes on Snape’s hands, “I wanted to apologize. And tell you some things that you may not have understood. And ask for a favor.” He took a deep breath and forced his gaze to rise to Snape’s face.

The expression there was one it took him a long moment to understand. Harry blinked. Relief? He feels relief?

It hadn’t really occurred to him that Snape would be hurting over this as much as he was. Harry uttered a small hiss of exasperation, mostly at himself. I don’t understand why he loves me as much as he does, but you’d think that I would stop forgetting it.

“You may begin with any of them, Harry,” Snape said. “The apology only if you wish to.”

Harry nodded. “I do. I want to say I’m sorry for misunderstanding what you said about Connor. I thought you meant that he just didn’t matter next to me, that he somehow deserved to die. But that’s not what you meant, is it? You like me better, and you think I’m the one Voldemort will target more, so I have to be ready to fight.”

More lines of strain eased on Snape’s face, ones carved so deeply that Harry hadn’t noticed them until they were gone. “Yes,” he said. Then, apparently unable to restrain his sarcasm any longer, he added, “I am somewhat surprised that it took you so long to understand, given what I said to you while you brewed the Wolfsbane. You are not in the habit of ignoring your own intelligence, Harry.”

“I was stubborn,” Harry conceded. Ouch. This hurts. On the other hand, it’s only admitting that you’re wrong. That means that you can do it. “And I really did think you meant that at first, with what you said in the hospital wing.”

Snape hesitated, then spoke as if picking his way among shards of broken glass. “Part of that does not change even with your new understanding, Harry. I still do not think you should have taken that curse. I think you should have trusted to a shield, or simply borne your brother out of the way.”

“And had the curse hit someone else?” Harry demanded.
“Did you know for certain that anyone was behind your brother?” Snape shook his head tightly. “No. You made what you thought was the best decision in a limited amount of time. I respect that. But it wasn’t the best decision, Harry. You speak of the curse hitting your brother or someone else on the battlefield as though it must never be allowed to happen. Then why does your life matter less than theirs? And why bring them into battle at all? Why plan something like the attack on Woodhouse, where you know their lives will be in danger?”

Harry squirmed. There were a few possible answers to that. None of them were pretty.

“It is a hypocrisy you have ignored for too long,” said Snape, his words gentle and savage both at once. “It must be overcome. You seem to have accepted it, since you have asked for people to fly with you in the next battle. But now, this. And it could happen again. What happens if the next sacrifice saves someone else—Draco, perhaps—and kills you, Harry?”

“Then I’ll have fulfilled my purpose.”

Snape’s face darkened.

“My purpose in making that specific sacrifice, I mean,” Harry hastily clarified. “I didn’t mean that I thought my only purpose in life is to protect other people.”

“And what of those left behind to mourn?” Snape demanded, rising to his feet and pacing back and forth in front of his chair. His robes swirled behind him hard enough to reveal the edge of his Dark Mark. “What of those whose ability to defend themselves you disregard in making this sacrifice? You claim on one hand to trust Draco and the rest of us in battle, but then you would plunge in front of us on the off chance we might be harmed.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. This was one of those ugly possibilities that he had thought about. A vates had to respect the choices of others, and avoid impinging on their free will if it was at all possible. By showing that he didn’t trust other people, some of them experienced fighters, to survive on their own, he wasn’t obeying that particular stricture of the path he had to walk.

“Do you understand, now?”

Harry opened his eyes to see Snape kneeling in front of him. His face was a stern mask, but tight with emotions that Harry could not bring himself to disregard. Harry forced himself to nod.

“On one thing, though, I can’t change my mind,” he whispered. “I’m not only making sacrifices because of my training. I’m not.”

Snape stood up and retreated a few steps, until Harry could look at him without craning his neck backwards. “I can provisionally accept that, for now,” said Snape, in a tempered voice. “But so much of your healing has been internal, Harry. I wish there were a way to judge how far along the road you are. Has ripping apart your mind truly given you good results? Would not talking to someone about your past other than Shiverwood benefit you more than remaining silent?”

“The first I can let you see, at least,” said Harry, relief at such a good segue making him giddy. “I wanted to ask for your help in closing my link to Voldemort with Occlumency.” He saw Snape relax still further. “A one-way barrier, so that I could remove it if I ever really need to.”

To his relief, Snape nodded. “I would not want you to lose control of such a vital part of yourself,” he murmured.

“And I wanted to ask for your help in training Connor.” Harry ignored the way Snape’s eyes narrowed and the cold, sneering mask that hung on his face in Potions class snapped up. “I know you don’t like him. But he’ll have to go into battle eventually, and I need someone who’s really, really good at Dark Arts to train him. Professor Merryweather might, but she might not. Remus would be too kind on Connor, I think, and anyway, he knows more defensive than offensive magic. I’m too much stronger than he is. Please?”

Snape snarled slightly. “Are you thinking of bringing him along in the attack on Woodhouse?”

“No,” said Harry quietly. He caught and held Snape’s gaze. “And as soon as we’re done here, I’m going to go and tell him that.”

Snape nodded. “You are not entirely devoid of sense where he is concerned,” he murmured. “That is refreshing.”

Harry let the sarcasm pass, and waited.

“If I train him,” said Snape, “then he must actually train with me, Harry. Not make the half-hearted effort he does in Potions. I
know that he is capable of competency, if not actual genius, but he will never try.”

“You could try being a little kinder to him,” Harry pointed out.

“Why?” Snape folded his arms. “There is no reason holding him back, nothing but dislike of me. I know Mr. Longbottom’s reason for incompetence in the class. Your brother has none of the same reasons. His magic could adapt to the art. He will not make it do so, because he has no patience. Do you really think training with me will inculcate that quality?”

“If both of you try halfway,” said Harry stubbornly. “I’ll tell him that, too. And you won’t have to have an audience in the training like you do in Potions. You can give him all the second chances you like, and still preserve your reputation as the Professor Who Sends Gryffindors Fleeing.”

“If Mr. Potter makes the promise to meet me halfway,” said Snape, “and does not whine about meeting me at eight’o’clock twice a week, then I will do it. Until the inevitable moment when all hell breaks loose and he refuses to listen to reason.” He paused, then added, “Eight’o’clock on Tuesday and Thursday.”

“Sir,” Harry snapped. Those were the hours the Gryffindor Quidditch team held practice.

Snape stared at him. Harry stared back. Finally, Snape nodded. “Eight’o’clock on Wednesday and Friday, then.”

Harry nodded back, and stood. “I’ll tell him. Like I said, I’m going to go explain a few things to him right now.” It was the last of his confrontations for the day. The thought made him dizzy with relief. He’d got through the one with Snape, the hardest one, without breaking down in tears or yelling. That was wonderful, and it gave him some hope that his confrontation with Connor would go the same way.

“Wait a moment, Harry.” Snape put out a restraining hand. “I would still like to see you speak to someone about your past.”

Harry scowled at him. He should have known this was coming, but he’d hoped that Snape would forget it in the irritation of being asked to train Connor. “I speak to Madam Shiverwood, when she summons me,” he said.

“I can understand why you would not want to talk to me, Harry.” Snape’s face was perfectly still. “But there are other candidates. Regulus. The Headmistress. One of the Malfoys. Even the werewolf, if you must. There is much to be gained from talking to someone who wishes to help you, who is not in charge of many cases of abused children and will lose your face among them.”

*That’s the point, Harry thought fretfully. That’s why I like talking to Madam Shiverwood, because she has more children to care about than just me.* It was also the reason why talking to Regulus was entirely out of the question. Regulus would concentrate too much on him, and yank and pull and tug out those things that Harry wanted to keep hidden like tangles of hair from his head.

He supposed that of the people Snape mentioned, the best candidate would be Remus, because he had the Gryffindors to counsel, and would be more likely not to force Harry to yield his secrets because of the lack of time.

But he’d already yielded enough in this confrontation with Snape, Harry thought. He’d admitted that he was wrong, and he’d made some steps towards reconciliation, and he’d agreed to block the scar connection even though it could be a useful weapon in the war. He fixed his eyes on Snape’s. “No,” he said.

“No, what?”

“No, sir.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Snape was fighting hard to keep his voice from a snarl, but Harry heard it anyway. “Why will you not speak with someone, Harry?”

“Because too much of my life is on display already!” The flare of temper arose before Harry could stop it. He controlled it, hard, and turned towards the door. “I understand why you did what you did,” he continued, in a low, tight voice. “That doesn’t mean I don’t hate it, and want everyone to stop peering at me. Most people know what happened, now. I can’t do anything about that. But I can and will keep my feelings on the matter to myself. I have Draco to talk to about other things, like the stupid actions people take as a result of those newspaper stories. I have Connor to talk to if I want to remember something good about the past, and Remus. I have you and my allies to come to about other problems, sir. I don’t see what’s to be gained by discussing my feelings about—my parents and Dumbledore.* Especially because people keep refusing to believe that I could actually forgive them.*
“Harry—“

“No. They’re mine, almost the only secrets I have left. They’re going to stay that way.” Harry glared at Snape over his shoulder. “I appreciate what you’ve done in the abstract, sir. But things like this make it really fucking hard to appreciate them in practice.”

He left before the last of the sweet taste of success in his mouth could sour. He managed to calm himself down as he walked. He was sure he was in the right on this one point. He would give way on others. He would try to correct hypocrisies. He would admit that Snape had been right about shutting the scar connection.

But the anger and hatred and forgiveness and love and pity and everything else he felt towards three specific people could not be of interest to anyone else. They were his. The trials would come, and go, and what would happen would happen.

Though not execution. Please, not that.

Harry would go on living through them and after them, unless he died in one of the battles first, and he would go on giving way on other points and correcting hypocrisies and admitting Snape was right. But he could see no reason for him to dig into his soul. Who cared, who had the right to care about those things, except him? It should not even be an interesting subject except to Harry himself.

******

“But I could—“

“No.”

“You’re not being fair—“

“No, I’m not.”

Connor turned away and punched the wall.

Harry sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. It had been a little much to hope that the confrontation with Connor would go as well as the one with Snape, he supposed. Connor was not Snape. He was impulsive, aggressive, and—well—overconfident. Harry loved his brother dearly, but he knew that Connor was too much a Gryffindor to relish being left out of battle, even though Harry had explained all the reasons as clearly as he knew how. Connor would need more training before he entered battle. He might have been able to go if he would consent to remain behind the lines, since he was brilliant on a broom, but Harry knew Connor, despite giving a promise like that with the best of intentions, would find the thought of interfering irresistible.

How can I blame him for that? I’m the same way. But I’ve had the training.

“I really, really hate this,” Connor told the wall of his bedroom, and then turned around and glared at Harry. Harry was grateful none of his yearmates were there. Of course, the only one who had really seemed tempted to linger and gawk once Harry came up to Gryffindor Tower was Seamus, and Ron and Neville had made a point of dragging him away the moment they saw Harry’s face. “I hate that you’re so much better than me. I hate the fact that you’re going to go out fighting and leave me here, but you’ll take Malfoy along.”

“All three of them, in fact,” Harry agreed lightly. “And it has nothing to do with not wanting to take you along, Connor. I would, if you could keep yourself safe. But you can’t, not yet, and you can’t add enough to the battle to spare the people it would take to guard you.”

He winced as he said that, since it did sound rather heartless. But he’d hardened himself to being heartless when he made this plan. He was not about to lie to Connor about the battle they’d be having on the full moon. He also was not about to take him along.

Connor’s face paled a bit, and his eyes sparked. “My compulsion ability—“

“We don’t really need anyone compelled,” Harry broke in. “We won’t want that for the Muggles, if they’re there, and we can handle the Death Eaters. Besides, the last I knew, you had to look someone in the eyes to really compel them. It would be hard to do that in the middle of battle.”

Connor closed his eyes. “Please, Harry?” he whispered. “I hate asking like this, but I want to fight.”
“I know,” said Harry, again wanting to squirm in discomfort. But he had made a promise to himself. He intended to carry it through. *Last confrontation of the day*, he chanted in his head. “But, Connor, I can’t. I’m not doing this as your older brother, just making you stay behind because you’re younger than I am—”

“By fifteen minutes—“

“See? That would be blatantly ridiculous. I’m doing this as a war leader, and because I know how the people I’m taking to Woodhouse fit into my plans.” Connor refused to look at him. It did sound strange, Harry had to admit, and he supposed it sounded stranger to someone who had been used to thinking of himself as the Boy-Who-Lived and the future leader of the Light at one point. “This is a reason to train hard with Snape,” he added, trying to sound encouraging. “The sooner you can learn to defend yourself with actual dueling spells, the sooner you can join us.”

“I want to go now,” Connor whispered. “Someone has to guard your back. And I want to make up for what happened on the beach, Harry.”

*Should have known that would be in there somewhere.* “It was my choice to jump in front of that curse, Connor,” Harry said quietly. “Not your fault.”

“I was the one who said your name and made it necessary.”

“And everything worked out fine,” Harry pointed out. “And now I want you to get the training you need so that that won’t happen again. You can best make up for it by working hard.”

Connor flopped bonelessly back on his bed and lay there for a little while. Then he said, “Eight’o’clock on Wednesday and Friday.”

“Right.”

“There goes my Friday evening,” Connor groused.

Harry smiled. “Thank you, Connor.” He stepped up to his brother and hugged him. Connor’s arms came up and clenched around his waist with unexpected strength.

“Don’t get yourself killed, you prat,” he whispered into Harry’s ear. “I can’t do this alone.”

Of all the confrontations today, that was what made him blink back tears. Harry whispered, “Thank you,” and then turned and sought the stairs back down to the Gryffindor common room. He could feel his brother’s eyes on his back as he departed.

He felt the urge to turn back and tell Connor he could come, after all.

But he had suspected he would feel that, and his preparation was enough to keep his head high and his shoulders stiff. This was hard, but Harry no longer felt compelled to hold back from doing hard things. If he had the courage and he had the will and he had the necessity, he would go through the fire and come out the other side.

*It can’t be worse than what I’ve already survived.*

…”*~*…”

**Intermission: Henrietta’s Game**

Henrietta examined the cauldron of Polyjuice potion, but could detect no differences in it from what should be apparent at this stage, with just a little more than two weeks to go until it would be ready. She shrugged and stepped away from it. Let it bubble and steam for now. She had other things to attend to, including two guests in her house.

She moved from her private potions lab to the ground floor, and opened the second door she came to. The wizard inside was already on his feet, his wand pointed at her. Henrietta lifted an eyebrow.

“I could choose to take offense to that, if I wished,” she said, and shut the door behind her.

The man said nothing, though he lowered his wand. Henrietta examined him thoughtfully; this room, a study equipped with
shelves but devoid of books, possessed many subtle enchantments to remove glamours and other magical forms of disguise, so she could be sure she was seeing the real man. He had a blunt face and brown eyes that probably looked secretive unless he was smiling. He must smile often, then, in his position. His hair was blond and wispy. He was a Mudblood, and had managed to get as far as he had partially on skill, partially on luck, and partially because his last name sounded like that of a famous Light wizarding family.

None of that, though, mattered to Henrietta as much as the name he had adopted for himself. He had lately started writing Daily Prophet articles under the name Argus Veritaserum. In them were many entertaining untruths about Potter. Henrietta had found them the more entertaining because everyone else thought his identity was a great mystery, but she had found him out in a few weeks by comparison of his writing style to other Prophet reporters. This only pointed out the stupidity of the rest of the world.

“Sit down, Argus,” she said. “Before I tell you what I can procure for you in a few weeks, I have to know how committed you are to lowering Harry Potter’s reputation.” She moved over and sat down in a chair facing him. Argus followed her slowly down, never looking away from her face. He rarely blinked. Henrietta wondered if the old stories were true, that Mudbloods sometimes bred with frogs and lizards to increase the strength of their bloodline.

“Very committed,” he said calmly. “Albus Dumbledore is my mentor, the one who taught me about the ethics of sacrifice at a young age, and the reason I survived the first war with You-Know-Who.” Henrietta barely resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. Voldemort had both a name and a title, and either was better than that ridiculous appellation the Muggle-lovers had chosen. “I know that he has made decisions and taken risks that insured the survival of the wizarding world where no one else would have made or taken them. I will not see him accused by a child who ought to be flattered by the degree of personal attention he received from a Lord of Light.”

How delightful. The Mudblood is flushing. Henrietta cocked her head and sat back in her chair. “And you think writing these articles about him will impact on him negatively enough to matter?”

“I am certain of it,” said Argus. “I’m already receiving post telling me that I’ve swayed many readers’ opinions. Now that they think of it, it doesn’t make much sense that fourteen years of child abuse could have gone unnoticed. That means that it was not abuse at all, of course, but something the boy agreed to. Now that he is a teenager and petulant—now that Slytherins have poured their venom into his ears and convinced him he’s special—he’d turn on those who sacrificed so much to make his life worthwhile.”

Careful, Mudblood, Henrietta thought, but did not say. Of course, Argus himself was ultimately a sacrifice in her plans, a role he should have no objections to playing. “Will it be enough to release the Headmaster?”

“One can hope so,” said Argus. “Albus’s trial isn’t until March, and by then, the truth about Potter will have reached everyone. And his parents’ trial isn’t for another month and a half. We may be able to clear Lily and James Potter from charges entirely.” His face shone with hope.

You will not. Potter will destroy you. So nice that he’ll owe your destruction and disposal to me. “Then I can promise that I’ll pass along the evidence I’ll have,” said Henrietta, with a firm nod of her head. “Potter doesn’t trust me enough yet to include me in all his activities. But I’m working on him. He has some extremely…nasty things planned for two weeks hence, things so nasty they turn even my stomach. He’s hinted that he’ll include me in those, and I can take photographs of them and bring them back for you.”

“Why would you want to hurt him?” demanded Argus, his flush altering from one of hope to suspicion. “He’s a Dark wizard, just like you.”

Henrietta let her lip curl and her eyes widen. “He is not a Dark wizard. He only plays at being one. And he is the son of a Mudblood. Can you ask why I would want to betray him?”

Argus frowned, then smirked. He must imagine that the similarity of his true last name to the more famous one had guarded his own dirty blood from her. No doubt he was now thinking that she would be chagrined when she found out that she’d helped someone like him.

Betraying him will be nearly as pleasant as getting Potter to submit to me in the first place.

“Then it is a pleasure indeed doing business with you, Mrs. Bulstrode,” said Argus, and extended his hand. Henrietta barely let her skin brush his. His blood was less objectionable than his blind fanaticism. Henrietta despised people incapable of looking after their own interests.
She escorted him to the Floo connection by which he’d entered, blocked that particular one so it could not be used again, and then sought another room on the ground floor, three doors down from the study where she had met Argus. Her daughter Edith huddled on the bed, ducking her head and staring fearfully up at her when she came in.

Henrietta smiled and walked forward. Edith cringed, but did not move away as her mother stroked her hair. Henrietta had her well-trained. The new spell curved around her neck and branded into her flesh had something to do with that, of course, but Henrietta prided herself on the claws she had hooked into Edith’s soul even more than the magical compulsions she could put her under.

Edith kept looking down. Henrietta at last murmured, “Good child. Little one. Do you know why I’ve called you home from Beauxbatons for today?”

A minute shake of the dark head.

“In two weeks,” Henrietta said gently, “you will do me a great service. You will drink a potion for me, and then you will do what I tell you to, so that I may take photographs of you doing it. You will ask no questions. You will tell no one of this. If you do, you know what will happen.” Her eyes flickered to the spell around Edith’s neck. *Regrettable, really. Mental control, of the kind Potter’s parents used on him, is so much more elegant. At least I know that this will increase her fear of me, and in the future she may do as I say without this outside pressure.*

Edith hastily nodded. Henrietta bent down and kissed her daughter’s hair. Edith shook under her. Henrietta could feel her magic—the sympathetic twin of her own, which made Edith her heir, but so dimmed by crawling, creeping fear that she would never be a threat to Henrietta’s position.

What pleased her even more was the fact that she still had years to work on Edith, who was only thirteen. Even when Henrietta died, her dominion would not end, because her daughter would carry her legacy forward into the future. She would not think a thought whose pattern was not set for her.

“You may leave for Beauxbatons in three hours,” Henrietta whispered, and then stood and left the bedroom, her plan buzzing pleasantly in her mind.

Edith would become Potter for as long as necessary to take the photographs, and then Henrietta would send the pictures on to Argus. She would do it only once, though she would retain other photos. When Potter had undergone one round of despair and humiliation, she would offer him the knowledge of Argus’s identity, and how to prevent the appearance of more photos. Probably the gratitude would not be sufficient to compel him to obey her. That was all right. The blackmail material of the other pictures would work well enough.

And if Potter refused even that incentive, Henrietta had Edith. She had seen Potter’s sacrificial tendencies on full display in the beach battle. She knew Potter would never let an innocent suffer in his place. He would do what Henrietta wanted to spare her daughter, a child he barely knew.

Henrietta felt regret all the while that she pursued her plan, because fluttering through her mind like bats’ wings went the hope that Potter could become like one of those ancient Lords, one she could be actually proud to follow instead of having to assume control herself because it was intolerable to bow to someone less fierce and intelligent than she was.

But what she knew of him, and what she read of him, sifting truth from lies, did not say it so. His lack of response to the Veritaserum articles was the last straw. A true Lord would have demanded an apology, at the very least, and dragged Argus into the light before Henrietta could get at him.

*He is well-intentioned, but weak. But he is still a better option than Voldemort the egomaniac or Albus Dumbledore the Muggle-loving fanatic. Once he is tamed to bit and bridle and rein, I think he will do nicely.*

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**Interlude: The Serpent’s Breath**

*October 3rd, 1995*

*Dear Lord Voldemort:*

I hope you do not think I do you any impertinence by contacting you. I have heard, from reading stories of the First War, that one
need only speak a certain incantation over a letter in order for it to reach you—but those letters must be sent by those wishing, sincerely, in their hearts to help and not harm you. I have used the incantation, and my intentions are pure. I can only hope this message will reach your hands or the hands of one of your loyal Death Eaters.

I will retain my name in silence for right now, even as I have used charms to disguise my handwriting. I am sure that a wizard of your power is capable of discovering who I am, and even my gender. I would not mind that, but I do not wish just anyone to know. The fools who think me their ally would put up such a fuss. They already do. I am tired of listening to them. I did what I could to maintain the alliance, but they only think me a joker. No one grants me any sincere respect. Even the people I counted on as friends look at me as if they would like to smack me, as if they think that I can’t know anything about the real world just because I didn’t fight in the First War. None of them did, either, except the traitors who have turned their backs on the allegiance they swore to you. I wonder if they forget that?

My reason for writing is to describe an attack that Harry Potter and his allies will make on the camp of Woodhouse on Saturday, the seventh of October. They will time their attack to coincide with the rising of the full moon, and they have five werewolves with them. The main attack, Harry Potter and four bodyguards, will come in on brooms, so that Potter can drop the anti-Apparition wards while the werewolves distract the guards. They plan to rescue the captured Muggles your Lordship took from London if they can, and if not, to make sure that your Lordship is unable to use Woodhouse in the future. There will be three strike forces working under Lucius Malfoy, Adalrico Bulstrode, and Severus Snape. Aurors will wait until the attack is done to come in and take any captured Death Eaters to Tullianum. Potter has assumed your Lordship has taken wounds in the autumnal equinox battle so severe that you will not be there.

My Lord, I am willing to serve you. I’ve had too much contact with Muggles already, which is not surprising, considering my life. I despise them, and I agree that it would be better altogether if they and their tainted progeny were gone from our world. When you discover my true identity, I hope that you will not disdain me for my bloodline. It might seem to compromise my allegiance, but I promise you, I wish you nothing but good. Potter and his allies have insulted me too many times.

If you will it so, I will come to you in the near future and take the Dark Mark. However, I hope to persuade you against this, for now, as it would make it impossible for me to retain my place in Potter’s ranks without being discovered. If you allow me to remain where I am, I will be able to pass you information on future attacks, and be well-satisfied in seeing Potter hurt and killed.

They will learn not to laugh at me. I have secrets I have never told any of them, secrets that even well-placed hints only made them sneer at me for. If you are so good as to find me worthy of your service, my Lord, I will be more than happy to reveal them to you.

With sincerity,  
The Serpent.

_**_*_*_*_**

**Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Killing Moon**

Minerva closed her eyes. She had been looking out across the Great Hall, and found her eyes drawn again and again to the Slytherin table, despite her attempt to look for problems in all the Houses.

**This will never do. You know that you cannot favor one set of students, as Headmistress.**

She took a deep breath, and sat in silence with her eyes shut for a few moments, hoping it might recall her balance. It didn’t, though. Indeed, without looking at anything else, her mind had free rein to show her memories: both of the meeting last week when Harry had planned to attack Woodhouse, and of the battles that she herself had fought in the First War, when the needs of the Light had drawn her out of Hogwarts.

Her fingers twitched. She wanted a wand. She wanted to go to war.

But she had always been sensible. Even then, she had known that Albus called on her only because she was a Transfiguration specialist, and they desperately needed her, since several of the Death Eaters fighting on Voldemort’s side were also skilled at transforming humans into animals. She’d even been meant to play a defensive role at first, transforming their fighters back and no more. And then the War had taken a sharp turn for the worse when Voldemort coordinated a series of attacks that left more than a hundred of the Light’s best wizards dead, and the Order of the Phoenix became the most important and organized force still fighting.

She’d been on the front lines, then. It was the proper place for a Gryffindor, she thought. **We weren’t meant to cower behind the**
But Albus had been with them then, strong in heart and uncorrupted in principle. Minerva had been able to rely on him to defeat Voldemort when the Dark Lord took the field himself, and she’d known her place: a follower, at best a second-in-command once the War ended and she was Deputy Headmistress, not a leader.

The Headmistress of Hogwarts has to stay behind. And, of all things, the force attacking Voldemort this time is mixed Light and Dark, and has a Slytherin leading them.

At that point, Minerva couldn’t help herself; she opened her eyes and looked over at the Slytherin table again. Harry was speaking with young Malfoy, his eyes wide and his movements sharp. He looked as if he would leap to his feet and prowl back and forth behind the table at any moment. Minerva smiled slightly. She knew the signs. Should Harry ever master the Animagus transformation, his form would be feline. His quick reactions, the way he moved, his surges of adrenaline, all confirmed it.

Things are different now, she thought, and the realization settled into the pit of her stomach as it never had before. I am a leader, of a sort, and I must stay here so that the wards cannot fall again. Harry has reached out to people on both sides of the fight. And just as Gryffindor soared into prominence when Albus defeated Grindelwald and during the First War, now Slytherin is rising.

Severus did not look happy; he had barely touched his food. Minerva slid a plate of the scones she knew he favored towards him. He turned his head and fixed her with a sharp, flat stare.

“Always the mother lioness with her cubs, Minerva?” he snapped.

“If Slytherins starve themselves, who fights tonight?” Minerva murmured back.

Severus blinked, and then examined her more closely, as if he had not known that she recognized the terms on which the battle was being fought. Then he nodded, murmured, “I would be foolish to become like Harry,” and began to eat.

Minerva sat back, satisfied that she had done almost all she could. Her fingers still itched, but she would content herself with strengthening the wards tonight.

And doing what she could to keep an eye on the behavior of her students, as well. The antagonism towards Harry was becoming more deliberate, and more worrying. Minerva would almost have said it was the result of a spell, save that she was sure a spell in Hogwarts would target her as well, and she had felt nothing of the effects. Perhaps Godric would know something of it.

Harry tossed back his head and took a deep breath of the night air. It made his breath steam in front of him, and he was grateful for the gloves and Quidditch gear he wore. If it was cool down here, he could only imagine how cold it would be when he was on his Firebolt.

He turned to Draco. “Ready?” he murmured.

Draco nodded. His face was pale, but it was always pale anyway. Harry knew he would certainly be composed enough to fly. He looked around one more time, then strode forward as if he were the one leading the way. Harry snorted and caught up with him inside a few steps.

His own mood was the opposite of Draco’s. His nervousness had faded as the week wore on—helped by the fact that he was no longer at odds with anyone, except Snape, who continued to bother him about talking—and a mixture of excitement and wild joy had taken its place. He could feel his heart beating everywhere in his body, in his throat and his ears and his fingertips as well as his chest. He saw everything when he turned his head, minute details he would never have noticed ordinarily, so that he kept starting at the glimpses of things caught from the corner of his eye. He had an answer for every question someone asked him, so much so that he’d quite astonished both Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra.

This was his war, the war he’d trained so long and hard to fight. This was the first major battle of it. Harry felt his blood and his mind and his instincts turning towards it like a flower towards the sun.

He spun around and uttered a loud whoop as they walked towards the middle of the Quidditch Pitch, where they were to meet...
John, Regulus, and Henrietta. Draco gave him a hard look. “Do I want to know what you’re so happy about?”

“Probably not.” Harry dropped his arms, shifting his hold on the Firebolt so that his fingers weren’t quite so cramped, and grinned at him. “You’d probably start scolding me about recklessness again.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Merlin help you, Harry, if you take one unnecessary risk on that battlefield tonight—“

Harry just hummed and didn’t listen to him. He knew the lecture by heart, anyway. He’d got it with every meal and every bedtime since Wednesday.

Draco didn’t quite understand, he thought, that battles were chaos once past the initial engagement. Harry sincerely hoped their plans would result in everyone getting alive out of Woodhouse tonight, but he accepted that those plans themselves would shatter when chance and the cruel creativity of Dark wizards went to work. That was why he had at least one weapon in reserve he hadn’t told anyone about, two if one counted what Regulus was bringing along. He patted his robe pocket, hearing the crimp and crackle of parchment.

“Harry? Are you listening to me?”

With a start, Harry focused back on what Draco was saying. “Um. No?”

Draco stopped, put out a hand, and snagged his arm, dragging him close. “Pay attention,” he snapped. “Keep your mind on what you’re supposed to be doing, not on taking curses for people. Fight like a Lord, or a vates, or a hellishly powerful wizard—whatever you want to call yourself, I suppose. Remember that we’re there to protect you, and trust us.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “At least, I trust you. I trust you more than Connor, Draco.”

That caused Draco to blink and stare at him, but a shout from the Pitch, hailing them, prevented him from saying whatever he wanted to say. Harry broke into a trot, and saw Regulus come striding to meet them. He was wrapped in close dark robes that Harry hoped would keep him warm enough. He had refused to even consider the idea of Quidditch gear, which he insisted he wasn’t comfortable in.

Harry scanned him for a moment, looking for the secret advantage that Regulus had said he was bringing along. Yes, there it was, a large sack tied to his belt. The sack quivered now and then. Harry grinned and accepted the half-embrace that Regulus gave him with his left arm. His right hand held his broomstick, a Nimbus.

“Ready?” he whispered into Harry’s ear.

“Hell yes.” Harry pulled away from him and turned to regard the other two who would be flying with them tonight. John was standing a pointed distance from Henrietta, his head slightly turned away, as though she smelled bad. Henrietta grinned at Harry. She wore Quidditch gear, and shrugged when she saw Harry looking at her.

“I was a Beater for Slytherin,” she said simply.

Harry carried on looking at her a moment longer, seeing something familiar in her face. He finally managed to identify it as the same feral excitement that he felt. “You like fighting, Mrs. Bulstrode?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” Henrietta hissed. “I would have gone out for a war witch if I didn’t have ambitions of actually surviving past my thirties.”

Harry grinned, feeling close to the Dark witch for the first time. He nodded to John, and then said, “Stay close to me. We’ll be flying beyond the wards of Hogwarts, then Apparating to that glen that Mrs. Parkinson had us memorize. You remember the looks of it?” Everyone except Draco, who would be Side-Along Apparating with Harry, nodded. “From there, it’s a straight flight to Woodhouse. We should be able to feel it the moment we Apparate in, thanks to its magic, and we should arrive at nightfall. Then I’ll concentrate on dropping the anti-Apparition wards, and we’ll get to the ground as quickly as possible.” He knew they knew this, but it never hurt to review; Harry thought this plan had more chance of surviving than some aspects of the ground strike did. “Are there any questions?”

Four heads shook. Harry felt like howling as he swung a leg over his Firebolt. He wondered how Hawthorn and the other werewolves, who would actually transform when the moon arose, handled the intense excitement.

“Let’s go,” he said softly, and they rose from the Pitch.
It had been a long time since Hawthorn had stood on this particular hillside outside Woodhouse, but she remembered it still, and the others, she saw with no little relief, had memorized the image well enough. They Apparated in not long before moonrise. Hawthorn had already taken the Wolfsbane, but she could feel her wolf stirring in her, speaking words of blood and hatred. This close to the transformation, her skin itched horribly.

Hawthorn turned to glance at the others, resisting the urge to scratch. Laura Gloryflower was the calmest of all of them, her hands linked together and her gaze fixed on the sweep of scree that would lead them downwards and to the west, towards the forest entrance of Woodhouse. Fergus whispered incessantly to Delilah. Claudia stood a short distance from them, trying to make it seem as if she weren’t listening in.

And Remus Lupin…

Hawthorn eyed him cautiously. She did not know what to make of him. He had suffered Greyback’s bite, as they all had, but he’d been a child then, and a werewolf all his life afterwards. Hawthorn had felt like an old soul when she met the three young Light werewolves, since she’d endured multiple transformations while they had yet to go through their first full moon. But Lupin moved with the wolf buzzing under his skin and in his soul, so that Hawthorn half-expectantly to see his face lengthen into a muzzle even before the moonlight touched him. She kept smelling him at odd times, too, as though his scent were stronger than the rest of them. Cool earth and water, leaves and raw fur—the closest to a natural wolf’s scent that she’d caught since she became a werewolf.

“Stay close together once we go in,” she whispered, calling the attention of others to herself. “We shouldn’t face any opposition, but if we do, bunch and drive forward. The others are depending on us to distract the Death Eaters. We can’t get caught up in a petty battle and slowed.”

Claudia gave a little half-yelp in answer; the others nodded. And then Hawthorn stiffened and pivoted, her head turning to the east.

The full moon was rising.

Hawthorn closed her eyes and dropped to all fours as the transformation took her. The wolf stirred madly in her belly, and then rushed out and over her in a drowning tide. Hawthorn could just remember that during her first change, when she didn’t have the Wolfsbane, savagery and the desire for blood had come with that first wave, burying her humanity entirely.

Now, though, the wave quieted the wolf’s snarling voice, and only resulted in a deep and profound stillness shattered a moment later by the arrival of the second wave. Hawthorn’s body rippled and cramped, and then became the center of a star of pain.

Her scream became a howl, mingling with the cries of the others. Hawthorn had only run with Fergus, Claudia, and Delilah once before, on the last full moon, but she had found she took comfort in hearing the voices of a pack.

The agony surged, darkening her vision. Her bones floated like sticks of wood on the sea, altering their shape and composition. But the moment passed, as it always did, and her memory relaxed; she simply couldn’t remember what that much pain actually felt like, and the relief was always so blessed.

A third wave, and the color slid out of the world. Scent rushed in to take its place. Hawthorn filled her nostrils with the grass, her companions, and a certain cool something that only seemed to exist in the world during the first moments of a full moon night.

A musky reek assaulted her from the side. Hawthorn turned her head, snarling, and then shut her jaws as she met the gaze of a great cat. The lioness who had taken Laura Gloryflower’s place paced forward a step or two, her tail swishing, and then turned and leaped downhill, towards the forest.

Hawthorn gave tongue to the others, briefly—it wouldn’t do for the Death Eaters to be alerted ahead of time by hearing a werewolf’s howl, hard as it was to control her voice—and had the satisfaction of hearing them follow her as she trailed the lioness. They bounded steadily south for a short time, then turned west. Now trees were looming ahead of them, and Hawthorn wagged her tail by instinct. She loved being among trees when she was in this form. It was right to feel branches brushing by over her head and briars almost snagging on her coat.

Something shoved up to her right shoulder. Hawthorn started and almost showed her fangs before she realized it was Lupin. He made a handsome, heavy gray werewolf, his ears pricked forward and his steps confident. He caught her eye briefly, and Hawthorn found herself looking away.
That gave her the chance to check on the others, so she didn’t mind. Fergus, his coat as pale as his hair, trailed Delilah, who had become a werewolf whose fur showed as a dirty white to Hawthorn’s altered eyes. She knew that, in reality, the war witch’s coat was golden. That wasn’t supposed to happen. Delilah’s magic did not seem to care.

Claudia, a heavy black bitch, her scar even more noticeable in this form since it meant one pointed ear was gone, loped at Hawthorn’s heels. Her teeth were wrinkled in a silent snarl, not aimed at any of her companions. She always looked like that, Hawthorn knew. Becoming a werewolf had altered her immensely. Once talkative and proud of her beauty, she was now silent and vengeful.

Hawthorn turned forward again as they entered the forest. The wind was against them now, carrying their scents forward, but the feel of Woodhouse’s magic provided a sure guide. Hawthorn kept her ears cocked and turning, seeking out the sounds of traps, but she did not greatly fear anything they might encounter here. Werewolves were immune to so many spells that a trap would have to contain silver or a Killing Curse to be of much use.

A slight snarl was all the warning they had before twelve sleek shapes broke the darkness ahead of them, springing from ambush and hurting to encompass them. Werewolves, Hawthorn knew at once; they were so close that she could smell them now, though she hadn’t before, with the turned wind.

Snarling in rage, she met the charge of the two trying to bowl her over, dodged in a flurry of fur, and snapped her jaws down twice. That left one dragging his intestines and the other hamstrung. The hamstrung bitch tried to whirl and tear her apart anyway. They didn’t have the benefit of Wolfsbane, and they were gone into the wildness that would naturally encompass a werewolf when the moon rose.

Hawthorn grabbed the bitch’s throat. Slick fur, salty flesh, and then blood as she wrenched her head sideways and tore out her throat. That made the bitch sag. Her companion had tangled his forepaws in his guts and lay dying on the ground. Hawthorn turned to check on her pack.

Three of the werewolves had hit Fergus. Hawthorn saw him die, as two of the attackers held him down at the shoulders and the other sliced through half his neck with cruel fangs. Hawthorn wondered if it was clever or abominable of her that her first thought was, *That will bind the Opallines to us for certain. Paton will never forgive the Dark Lord the murder of his son.*

Delilah and Lupin were working in tandem to dance around three other members of the enemy pack, making them spin in several directions without landing a bite. Hawthorn felt her lips lift in a snarl of contempt as she saw the clumsy, hesitant movements of the strangers. They were almost certainly new werewolves, this only either their first or second transformation. Delilah had experience gained through six full moons now, and Lupin was a creature of grace and beauty, avoiding their awkward lunges as if he were made of mist.

Claudia had already downed her own two attackers. Their bodies were half torn apart, and she was closing in on another victim, her muzzle stretched out before her body and her paws flying. She was only really happy when she was killing something, Hawthorn knew, potion or no potion.

Laura Gloryflower had just cracked the skull of the last werewolf in her jaws like an egg. She left him slumped, a bloodied ruin, and turned to face the three who had taken Fergus. They closed in cautiously, panting. They were more experienced, Hawthorn saw, more often changed, and what they lacked in rationality they made up in instinct. They knew that this great cat would be a tougher opponent than the young werewolf they’d just slaughtered.

Hawthorn allowed herself a momentary howl of grief for Fergus, packmate, downed, dead, and then she sprang to join Laura. One thought did burn in her head in the moment before she let human experience and lupine reflexes take over to guide her in the battle.

*Where is Fenrir?*

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Harry narrowed his eyes as he saw Woodhouse for the first time. He had known what to expect from the memory Hawthorn showed him, but she had not been able to see all the nuances of the intense natural magic that surrounded it. Harry saw it as a fallen star, a singing star, with subtle, different vibrations arising depending on whether they came from wood, stone, grass, or treetops.

“Enemies.”
Harry wheeled sharply. He was flying in the center of their formation, Regulus ahead of him, John and Draco to the sides, Henrietta behind. It was Henrietta who’d spoken the warning, her eyes aimed over Harry’s shoulder. He looked, and saw seven brooms rising to meet them from the eastern slope of Woodhouse, behind the quadrangle of buildings. Harry clasped his hand down on the Firebolt until he felt his knuckles pop, as paranoid suspicion, focused on what could happen, became grim certainty.

*We’ve been betrayed.*

“We have to kill them or down them,” he snapped. “Henrietta, I want you to—”

“Shove it, Potter,” Henrietta said. Her wand was in her hand, and she was glaring at him. “Don’t be an idiot. Concentrate on dropping the anti-Apparition wards. It’s what you’re here for. The rest of us will take care of this.”

“I have to—"

“Remember your place, you idiot. *Avada Kedavra!*”

The green fire of the Killing Curse cut the night, and one of the flyers tumbled from his broom. The others broke, dipping and diving, and resumed their flight more cautiously. Harry thought they probably hadn’t anticipated an Unforgivable cutting one of them down from so far away. One of them did cast a curse back, but it sputtered and died in the air long before reaching them.

Harry took several deep breaths, and then nodded, and turned towards Woodhouse again, this time seeking to separate the delicate lines of the wards from the rest of the singing, glowing magic.

Draco hovered next to him, Regulus on the other side. John was racing to join the fight with the enemies, and Henrietta was right beside him. All of these things Harry was aware of distantly, but for the moment, as Henrietta had reminded him, he had to do that which he was there for.

His will bore down, his sight reaching out through his eyes, his knowledge joining with them. He knew what wards felt like through his training, and now he sought and found layered defensive spells. He smiled a bit. Voldemort had had what he probably thought was a clever idea, tying the anti-Apparition wards to the magic of Woodhouse itself. Someone would have to destroy the heavily warded wooden building before they could Apparate in.

Of course, Voldemort hadn’t been planning on a Lord-level opponent. Harry destroyed the wards from the other end, where they were hooked to the grass and hills of the valley, unbraiding the spells one by one with chanted *Finite* after *Finite*. That left a lashing, uncoiling vortex of threads that would have consumed most wizards, but Harry calmly turned them back with his own powerful *Protego*. The ends of the torn wards retracted into Woodhouse with a snap, like the heads of snails going home. Harry nodded, and touched his left wrist with his hand, using his knees alone to grip his broom as he hovered.

“*Adoro bracchio de Lucius Malfoy!*” he murmured, and heard Lucius’s voice speaking his name a moment later. He kept his message brief. His instincts were screaming at him to get to the ground. If Voldemort was there, as now seemed likely, only Harry could face him.

“The wards are down. Pass the message to the others, and Apparate in.” The ground forces were grouped together, so Lucius shouldn’t need much more than a shout to pass the message.

He ended the spell and then dived, hearing the sharp *cracks* of Apparition already beginning. Harry kept his concentration ranging ahead of him, trying to find Voldemort. He knew they had been betrayed, but he couldn’t bother to waste time on panic and hatred right now. He fed the emotions to the Occlumency pools, and they swallowed them. His focus had to be on finding the Dark Lord.

Draco and Regulus dropped back, flying near his shoulders as they came in across the quadrangle of buildings. Harry kicked his Firebolt further downward, carefully measuring his speed. He didn’t want to outpace the other two, but he badly wanted to be out of the air, now that he knew the Death Eaters had forewarning of their arrival. People on brooms were too vulnerable to curses flung from the buildings around Woodhouse.

They lowered—twenty feet above the ground, fifteen. Harry saw two dark shapes fall past him, and heard a triumphant cry in Henrietta’s voice. She and John had taken care of the flyers, then, Harry thought, and would soon join them.

Ten feet above the ground. They were next to the northernmost stone building now, flying over a long patch of tall grass.

Blackness surged in the grass. Harry, flown past and turning towards the sudden glimpse of movement, didn’t understand what he
was seeing until a strip of silver in the black oriented him. By that time, Fenrir Greyback had already leaped, clenched his jaws around the tail end of Draco’s broom, and dragged him to earth, shaking and spinning him violently as they went. Draco’s scream was caught off as he plowed into the ground.

Greyback tumbled a short distance away, and then rushed back in. Draco had his wand already in hand and managed to get off a spell, but it bounced from the huge black werewolf, as Harry had known it would. Greyback came in close, his jaws snapping, trying to get a firm hold on Draco’s torso or limbs.

Harry felt rage turn him incandescent, transparent. His magic branded the night with fire in his immediate vicinity, and then he cried out, in a voice he hadn’t known he was capable of, the voice of an angel or a demon, “Greyback. Look at me.”

The werewolf shouldn’t have known what he was saying, with his mind drowned in bloodlust. But perhaps he could recognize his own name, or perhaps the movement, as Harry came diving straight at him, made him lift his head and turn. Harry saw the moonlight flash on his teeth, on his eyes.

Magic and rage and will together took flight from Harry, slamming into Greyback. For a moment, he was there, Draco temporarily forgotten, his body sinking into a crouch as he prepared to spring at Harry.

Then he—wasn’t there anymore.

Harry heard the snap of inrushing air as it came back together around the sudden jagged hole. Backlash made him stagger on his broom, and he wheeled the Firebolt, instinctively compensating for the lack of balance, as he would have compensated for catching a Bludger to the side. Fire ran through his head in small tendrils, making him feel the tiniest bit drunk.

But the intoxication cleared in seconds. He knew what he had done. He had looked at Greyback, and the werewolf had ceased to exist. He had killed him with almost pure magic.

And he could not regret it.

Harry leaped from the Firebolt while it was still a few feet above ground, rolling as his mother had taught him, coming up safe from the fall and collapsing into a kneel beside Draco. “Draco,” he breathed, staring at him, looking for some sign of a bite or a scratch. Even such a tiny mark could be sufficient to spread the disease, the werewolf web. He couldn’t see one, but perhaps that was just his hope. “Are you all right?”

Draco rolled on his back and smiled up at him. Harry smiled back, unsure if it was the relief or the release of Ignifer’s fire that was making his vision burn with white spots at the corners.

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Draco wanted to pant, wanted to lie still, wanted to wrap his arms around Harry and hold on, wanted to climb back on his broom and fly out of there. All his desires had narrowed to one when Greyback grounded him—the desire to live—and now that he was past that point and certain he had not died yet, they exploded in a giddy stream, spinning around and through his head.

He’d been thrown down brutally and the breath taken out of his lungs, though, so he just lay there for a moment, staring at Harry, blinking as the streamers of fire abruptly turned the night to high noon, grateful he could see.

He had to see, because the white-cheeked werewolf made no noise as she rose from the tall grass behind Harry and closed on him in a flying leap. For a moment, Draco saw her soaring, her dark fur whipping around her, her teeth bared in a skull-ricitus of pain, her face seeming scorched, and entirely bared, by the white left half.

His wand was in his hand, and Draco lifted it, the lessons of a dusty classroom abruptly taking the place of his whirling wishes, and cried, “Ardesco!”

The werewolf’s fur caught and smoked, just a bit. She snarled. But werewolves were mostly immune to magic, and the spell was not enough to make her alter the trajectory of her spring. She crashed onto Harry and bore him to the ground, then reared up, gaze locking on the bare back of his neck.

Draco pushed his mind frantically out from his body, and landed in hers. Unfamiliar weight nearly crushed him, the configuration of four legs instead of two drove him mad, and blood-blind savagery and grief for the loss of a mate tried to eat him alive. None of it worked. Draco had his own mate to defend, as this mind understood it, and he possessed the werewolf and pushed her off Harry before he even thought of what he was doing.
He knew his own body would have dropped and collapsed, and he whipped himself back to it, traveling in the snap which he imagined Apparition was like. He opened his own eyes, found his own wand in his own hand, and lifted it. The werewolf lay stunned on her side a few feet from Harry, beginning to lift her head. The hatred that drove her was too great to be deterred by a mere temporary loss of control.

Well, the hatred that drives me is great, too. Draco grabbed that hatred, and the memory of a voice from last year, that of the man who had called himself Moody, murmuring the list of curses that not even a werewolf was immune to.

Draco aimed. It seemed he had all the time in the world. Harry was stirring. The werewolf had stood. She hurtled towards him, paws still silent, teeth still bared in their skull-grin, eyes locked on his throat.

And through all of that, through pain and shock and onrushing death, Draco still had time to whisper, “Avada Kedavra.”

His wand shook in his hand as the spell surged out of him, draining him of his hatred, a line of green fire that speared the werewolf and turned all her movement into stillness. She fell where she’d stepped, one paw still outstretched in front of her. Her malice sparked from her dead eyes like his own loathing reflected.

Draco dropped to his knees, panting. He shut his eyes. He hurt, with an emptiness deeper than the hatred had been. He could not believe he had done that, but he had to, because the evidence lay not five feet away.

“Draco.”

Draco turned and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. Harry was up on his knees now, his arm wrapped around him, murmuring sweet and soothing nonsense into his ear. Draco clung to that. If he hadn’t cast the Killing Curse, Harry would be dead. His first casting of an Unforgivable was more than a fair trade for that.

He’d always known that he would have to do this, he thought numbly, accepted since he was six that he would someday use the green fire. The Malfoys were Dark wizards. Dark wizards used the Unforgivables. Why was it hitting him so hard now? And how could he do nothing for the moment but kneel here and fight tears and bile and vomit?

“It’s all right,” Harry whispered to him, when Draco could concentrate on his words. “It’s all right. She’s dead, Draco, and you’re alive, and you haven’t changed. I promise you.”

Draco had not known how badly he needed to hear that until Harry said it. He wrapped the words around him in place of the arm Harry had to take back, and nodded when Harry stood and looked inquiringly down at him.

Harry nodded back, then gripped his arm and pulled. Draco stumbled to his feet, shocked both by the force of the tug and the kiss with which Harry greeted him when he was standing, hard enough to make their teeth clack together. Harry drew back and grinned at him through a bloodied mouth. Draco couldn’t tell if he’d done that, or the werewolf had, when she drove him into the ground.

“We’ll fight now,” said Harry simply. “Back to back.”

Draco nodded, and the sickness and the emptiness began to thaw. He was here. He was now, and he was alive, and Harry was here and now and alive with him.

Harry turned, his hand still firm on Draco’s, and looked across an expanse of grass towards Regulus. Draco saw that his cousin had split open the sack he’d brought along, and was pouring a steady stream of small objects onto the ground. Draco shuddered when he recognized them.

“Attention,” said Regulus crisply, and the artificial spiders who’d tried to poison Harry in third year spun around and looked up at him. Regulus nodded back at them. “Go in front of us. Bite anyone who tries to cast curses at us.”

The spiders gave a massive click of their legs, and then scuttled off, spreading out in a black carpet. Harry gave a howling laugh, and began to stalk after them, murmuring something under his breath. Draco strained to hear as he jogged along at Harry’s right shoulder.

“They anticipated our attack, but Voldemort isn’t here. He’s still too badly wounded, I think. This will be fun.”

Draco shuddered a little, but Harry smiled at him over his shoulder, and he forgot his fear at the unearthly beauty of his
boyfriend’s eyes lit by fire and feral intensity. He shifted his grip on his wand, and turned to meet the rest of the battle, bracing himself to kill again.

He’d done it once. He could do it again.

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She’d forgotten.

Henrietta had once loved to fly on a broom. She’d gone out for a Beater less for love of the game than for love of flying. She’d expected the ride to be her favorite part of the evening, and when she’d taken down the Death Eaters who opposed them on brooms—pitiful flyers, one and all—she’d resigned herself to boredom. Even with the help of the traitor that it seemed lurked among their own ranks, the Death Eaters hadn’t mustered a competent defense. Then again, why they should have grown in skill since the battle on the equinox, Henrietta didn’t know.

But then she landed, and she saw Potter and Malfoy’s son dispatching the werewolves, and she paused a moment to admire that, and so she saw the dark figure making his way towards Potter from the shelter of the northernmost building. Henrietta stared. Her heart picked up so much speed that her vision blurred. She could not believe—no. She had forgotten much, including her own excitement at the thought of having a real challenge, but she could not have forgotten the way this man moved.

Apollonis had filled the air with fire, revealing the Death Eater’s face, since he wore no mask, but Henrietta didn’t need the help. Blind, she would have known who he was.

She had simply never expected to see him again.

As he took aim at Potter, Henrietta, with joy in her heart and wetness forming between her legs, called out, “*Cor cordium flammae!*”

He staggered, but he was good at resisting curses that took place inside personal shields, and he ended the spell before it took hold. Then he spun, and then he saw her, and then he went quite still.

Henrietta stalked forward, laughing so hard it was difficult to speak. She managed it at last, though. “Hello, Rosier.”

Evan Rosier stared at her. There was insanity in his eyes, but no joy. Henrietta didn’t think there would have been. Potter was probably a toy to him—so powerful that Rosier entertained no serious hopes of being able to conquer him, only string him along and use him for amusement. Henrietta, on the other hand, had both battled him and fucked him, and walked away alive from both of those encounters. She didn’t think there was anyone else who could say the same.

“No words for your old friend? I’m hurt,” Henrietta whispered.

Rosier recovered then, and said, with the calm deadliness that he showed when he wasn’t playing, “*Dolor immoderatus.*”

Henrietta laughed. He *had* forgotten some things, including the pendant she carried against her skin, one of the Bulstrode heirlooms, that prevented the curses Rosier favored from getting under one’s shields and inside the body. Not his Blood-Burning Curse, not *Ardesco*, not the Endless Pain Curse he’d just tried to use, would impact her as long as she wore it.

“I wish you were dead,” Rosier said.

“Annoying, aren’t I?” Henrietta asked cheerfully, and then they began to dance, and rapture flooded and consumed her.

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Lucius came in hard and fast from the south, hearing the cries of werewolves in the woods, seeing Apollonis’s fire slice the night into ribbons, feeling his every sense rouse to full alertness.

Behind him were Belville, Burke, Starrise, and Narcissa, all of them as alert as he was, Lucius hoped. He would hate to have something happen to them because they weren’t alert. On the other hand, it would be no one’s fault but their own. He was their guide, nor their minder.

He saw Death Eaters coming to meet them, clad in dark cloaks and white masks. Memories ran side by side with Lucius for a moment, reminding him of the time when he would have stood among them, and then they died and none took their places.
Memories were not the friends of a seasoned fighter in his battle. He concentrated on what was around him. He saw what was there.

And Narcissa was there, on the left, and there were three Death Eaters coming for them, spread out with roughly equal distances between them. Lucius turned, and met his wife’s eyes; she was already looking at him.

“Locusta’s Kiss?” he asked.

“But of course,” Narcissa murmured, and caught his arm. Lucius lifted his wand to point at the Death Eater on the far left. The others immediately scrambled faster, as if they thought he hadn’t noticed them.

Lucius cast a moment before he heard Narcissa’s voice, intoning the same curse. “Virus Locustae!”

The Death Eater on the right and the one on the left fell, convulsing, suffering as if from the bite of a Locusta snake. That left the one in the center with the opportunity to take revenge on one of them, but he hesitated about which one it should be.

They always did.

Lucius spun his wife around in front of him as if they were dancing, so that she presented her wand and then her back and then her wand, and their enemy oriented on her. Meanwhile, Lucius aimed his wand under Narcissa’s lifted arm and cast the Locusta curse again. The Death Eater’s eyes widened in an expression of surprise most amusing before he fell.

Narcissa finished her spin bound close to his body, and Lucius leaned in and kissed her harshly. Narcissa returned the kiss with equal force, laughing smugly into his mouth. They had the right to be smug, Lucius thought. The Locusta’s Kiss maneuver was difficult to pull off, and had both elegance and deadliness. A glance to their left showed that Burke was looking at them with admiration.

“Would that more young witches and wizards today knew the true pureblood rituals,” he murmured. “It’s all that separates us from Mudbloods.”

Lucius refrained from rolling his eyes, but only because Belville was striking a heroic pose beyond Burke and casting some complicated spell in a Celtic language that had no more apparent effect than a tripping jinx. That left it to the rest of them to finish the real work, while Belville cocked his head around at each of them, as if demanding they admire his learning. Ravenclaws, Lucius thought, with contemptuous resignation.

Narcissa charged beside him as they fought their way towards Woodhouse, and they had the chance to use the Locusta’s Kiss again, as well as the Whirlwind Tango. Lucius could feel his heart beating hard in contentment, and he caught a glimpse of the same emotion in Narcissa’s eyes.

This was the reason he had agreed to let his son go with Harry, in the hopes that Draco might have the opportunity to fight beside the young man he so obviously loved. Nothing bonded spouses like battle. If Draco had that kind of connection with their Potter after this evening, Lucius would be assured they were meant for each other just as they were.

If not…well.

*There is still some time for Draco to learn lessons in the emotional control he needs.*

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Really, it was so easy to trick people.

Honoria reflected on that as she watched the sixth Death Eater in a row try to fight one of her illusions, and then she sneaked up behind the illusion and stuck the tip of her wand between his ribs. She murmured a Cutting Curse and he was down, just like that.

Or maybe the Dark Lord just couldn’t get very good help, which was also a possibility, she supposed.

She glanced around, restless. She was with Snape’s force, coming in from the east, and they were no doubt striking terror into the hearts of all and sundry. Snape was, at least. The man fought like one of the robots Honoria’s mother had once described to her, all lethal precision and endless strength, striving to get to the center of the battle and hook up with the *vates* he loved like a son.

Honoria watched as Rhangnara used some highly complicated spell that appeared to tie his victim’s guts up in knots, and then
decided, quite clearly, that she no longer needed to stay with them.

She was bored. And she could do things that no one else could. And Harry might need her eyes.

She crouched, safe in the shade of an illusion, and then leaped. Her body tumbled and turned, melted and reformed, and she struck upwards, a sea-mew, seeing with clear eyes in the constantly renewed light of the fire that illuminated them all. If anyone caught sight of her, they no doubt thought they were seeing another illusion, or maybe a stray bird wandered into the battle. That was because no one knew she was an Animagus. No one knew her secret. Honoria loved having secrets.

She canted to the north, towards the place that Harry and his honor guard would have come in on their broomsticks. No one was flying right now, so they must have landed already. Houses ringing with magic passed underneath her, and Honoria cackled, the sharp gull-laughter that irritated most people who did not realize what clever and dead useful birds gulls were.

She would find Harry and...help. Or, at the least, amuse herself. And if someone thought she was dead because of her disappearance, then she could always have the fun of reappearing “alive” later.

She hoped it was Belville who thought she was dead. She always wanted to surprise those who most deserved it.

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Harry strode confidently towards the buildings that surrounded Woodhouse. Voldemort wasn’t there. He saw no need to risk himself on the battlefield, perhaps. Or perhaps the traitor’s communication, whatever it had been, hadn’t even reached him. If he was in one of those private lairs Lucius had talked about, it was likely.

As he walked, Harry drew out the scrap of parchment from his robe pocket. “I solemnly swear I want to attack Woodhouse,” he whispered, and the lines of an enchanted map appeared, racing across the paper until they formed an image of the valley. Harry grinned. He’d worked on this throughout the last half of the week. It was good to know that he hadn’t lost his touch since he’d created the map of Godric’s Hollow two years ago.

“What’s that?” Draco asked, of course, trying to peer over Harry’s shoulder.

Harry showed him the map, studying the dots still gathered in the midst of the quadrangle. Sure enough, no dot marked the Dark Lord’s presence. There was Karkaroff—Harry curled his lip—and several names that Harry was only remotely familiar with from stories of the First War, and several completely unfamiliar names that looked Russian, probably young Death Eaters from Durmstrang. No Bellatrix. Harry wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed on that score.

So, about twenty Death Eaters still lying in wait, then. It was probably Karkaroff who organized the defense. Harry shifted the map so that he could see it better in the light of the flames, and then frowned as he realized that a dot he’d simply assumed was a Death Eater had only one word beside it.

Siren.

Shit, Harry thought, and stared harder at the map. The siren’s pool was within the quadrangle, against the southernmost building, nearly opposite from where they stood now, and past both Woodhouse itself and the waiting Death Eaters. He didn’t know how to get there without a pitched battle.

Wait. Yes, I do.

Harry smiled and glanced at Regulus. “Get the spiders ready,” he said. “There are Death Eaters who’ll come flooding around that corner in a moment.” He nodded at the corner nearest to them, which made Regulus jump and glance narrowly at him, noticing the map for the first time. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Sometimes, you really are Sirius’s godson,” he muttered.

Harry acknowledged the compliment with a small nod.

“Wait. That corner?” said John, who’d just come up behind them. Harry wondered briefly where Henrietta was, then discarded the worry. She could take care of herself if she was on their side, and if she wasn’t, then his magic could take care of her. Either way, she was probably having more fun wherever she was.

“Yes, that corner,” Harry replied, and then began to murmur, aloud for the benefit of those with him. “Aedifico spiritum cum
He smiled as Draco’s eyes lit with recognition. This was the incantation that Connor had used to fool the dragons in the Triwizard Tournament. Harry watched as an illusion of himself formed next to him, so perfect that it made John start and glance at him in wonder. Harry sent the illusion forward with a wave of his hand, peeking around the corner of the building.

He heard Karkaroff’s astonished shout, and then there came the sound of clattering footsteps, moving directly towards them, and of fired curses. Harry made his illusion run back around the corner, and then braced himself.

Regulus’s spiders clicked their legs together.

Harry backed up a few steps, readying himself for a pull. Draco aimed his wand over his shoulder. Regulus’s spiders scuttled forward, and the first Death Eaters screamed in surprise and agony as the venom entered their systems. Remembering how it felt to suffer from the spiders’ poison, Harry couldn’t resist a sympathetic shudder. He thought they would probably think what he did next to be more horrible, though.

He opened the serpent’s jaws, and began to swallow their magic, carefully aiming above the spiders so that they could continue working. The two nearest Death Eaters, both of them small enough to be somewhere near Harry’s age, fell to their knees crying out as Harry ripped their power away. Harry winced, and closed his eyes, but continued drawing. With Regulus and Draco right there, he couldn’t take the chance that anything might hurt them.

When he thought he’d taken in enough magic, and Karkaroff and some of the others were hesitating to come around the corner because they feared their comrades’ screams, Harry charged. Draco gave an indignant shout, which Harry ignored. Draco was perfectly capable of keeping up if he decided that he wanted to.

Around the corner, behind the building, in the shadow, and he could smell water, and see the edge of the siren’s pool. Karkaroff was right there, aiming his wand with a shocked expression.

Harry spat out the magic he’d swallowed, and knocked the Death Eaters away like mice suffering from the swat of a cat’s paw. He heard skulls crushed and spines snapping as they rolled. He put the knowledge of those sounds in the same place where he put the fact that he’d willed Fenrir Greyback out of existence by looking at him. He would accept, and deal with later, the fact that he had killed, painfully and numerous times.

That is what war is.

He ran through the newly clear area of earth, aiming for the pool. The bulk of Woodhouse loomed to the right, tempting him to look, so ablaze with magic that it made Harry want to wonder and sing. But he had to stop the siren first, and he was probably the only one who could.

Draco and Regulus were right behind him, John panting on their heels. Harry passed Woodhouse, and saw a shape moving between the eastern and southern buildings, near the far shore of the siren’s pool. He felt his heart lift when he realized it was Snape. His force had broken through whatever guards had been waiting on the far side of the valley.

And then the siren burst out of the pool, wrapped her arms around Snape’s waist, and pulled him into the water, singing as she went.

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Ignifer stopped fighting when she heard the song.

It twisted around her mind, so lovely that tears were streaking her cheeks before she realized it. She put a hand over her face, shuddering. Memories sprang up in her mind like blades of grass, memories of light and goodness before she’d turned her back on the Light she was raised in, Declaring for the Dark.

She could have that home back, whispered the singing voice. She could have her parents back, not her father as he’d become, stern and proud and inflexible, and not the indifferent mother who talked to her from the fireplace every day, but her parents as they’d been when she was a little girl, furiously proud of her. She found herself taking a step forward, shivering all the while, longing.

A hand caught her arm. Ignifer struck out blindly, trying to hurt whoever held her. She needed to go to the song, the singer. She needed to follow the path that had suddenly opened in front of her heart.
Then another song rose. It did not exactly combat the first. It twined around it, and turned it, exposing it to the light like a jewel. It let Ignifer see the flaws in that music, how false it was—not a jewel, but paste. Her head cleared, and she stood, blinking, with Arabella Zabini’s hand on her arm and the Songstress’s voice throbbing in the air around her.

“What was that?” Ignifer demanded, then realized the question was foolish; Zabini was too busy singing, and preventing the song from snaring her again, to answer her. The others in their force were waking from what looked like similar trances, shaking their heads. Adalrico Bulstrode frowned.

“The song is coming from there,” he said, nodding to the buildings. “I think we should pursue it. Whatever it is can harm our vates.” He began to stride, the air around him turning steadily darker. Ignifer frowned, then shrugged. There were rumors of magical gifts in the Bulstrode line, magic they usually hid.

And then Adalrico’s words caught up with her.

*Something that might hurt Harry.*

Ignifer hurtled forward. She had just found this alliance. She was not about to lose it.

Zabini followed her, still cocooning her in the song, battling what Ignifer now realized must be the voice of a siren—

And then that voice stopped.

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Harry didn’t think as he heard the splash. He didn’t think as he heard the song. Visions were trying to fill his head, but nothing could compare to that too-real, too-present memory of Snape going down to his probable death, the siren’s arms wrapped around him and her beautiful face upturned to watch his as it went slack.

He found himself leaving the ground, or rushing through it, a trick he hadn’t performed since his third year, when he ran to Hogwarts from the Forbidden Forest to save Draco from one of the Black snakes. He just barely remembered to cast a charm that would let him breathe underwater before he plunged into the pool.

Unlike the Hogwarts lake, where he’d been last year, this was perfectly clear, and the throbbing bursts of Ignifer’s fire overhead irradiated it like beams of sunlight. Harry could see the siren on the far side, drifting near an obviously magically-constructed bank of stone. She sang and sang, her voice thick as the water was. She had her gaze and her grip locked on Snape, who was not breathing.

Harry flung the breathing charm. Snape coughed, and then his chest began to heave, bubbles trailing from his mouth.

The visions came crowding back again, trying to enchant and snare Harry with images of a perfect childhood, a good relationship with his parents, an existence entirely ignored by everyone, if only he would come to the siren and touch her. Harry found it as hard to resist, for just a moment, as he had the song of the many-legged creature in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. This siren was free of a web, her voice unrestricted, and she belonged to a kindred of magical creatures made to compel.

Then Harry’s hatred of compulsion kicked in, and he bucked his mind and threw off the strands of song. The siren’s eyes, large and shining green, met his. Harry tossed his thought like a spear through their connected gazes.

*I am vates. Hear me! Voldemort fooled you. He set your kind free only to enchant and hurt wizards. I have freed others. Look into my heart and see the truth. Look now. I am the breaker and unbinder of webs. The one you hold is my guardian, and if you do not release him, I will kill you, though I wish magical creatures nothing but good.*

The siren heard him, or perhaps she heard and understood the impulse of freedom in his mind; Harry had never believed anything more sincerely in his life. She cried out, a musical sound that luckily did not resemble her song enough to harm anyone, and her arms loosened on Snape’s waist. He drifted in the water. Harry swam up to him and draped himself underneath his arm, never looking away from the siren.

Her voice crept into his mind, a timid little girl’s voice, rising and falling in waves like the ocean or the restless shifting of her
fish’s tail. Is it true? He tricked us? We were not going after rightful prey, but only his enemies?

That is true, Harry affirmed. He would never have allowed you to enchant or compel the wizards that follow him. He did not offer sirens true freedom, but a new web.

I must tell the others of this. We are free, and we wish to sing. We must have the freedom to drown whomever we wish.

The siren hurtled away, speeding smoothly towards a low entrance in the bank of the pool that Harry hadn’t noticed before. She ducked into it and was gone, with a flirt of her tail.

Harry heaved out a breath, and then swam for the surface, dragging Snape along with him. It wasn’t easy with only one hand to guide his way, but other hands grabbed him when he got to the surface, and Draco and Regulus helped him back into the open air. Harry let the water-breathing charm go, and turned anxiously to Snape as Regulus laid him out on the back of the pool, murmuring, “Finite Incantatem. Ennervate.”

Snape coughed, spewing out quite a lot of water, and sat up. Harry ended the water-breathing charm on him, and met his eyes.

“Imbecile,” Snape spat.

Harry found himself smiling. “That settles the question of whether you’re all right, then,” he said, and had to shut his eyes. “Merlin, sir, I—“

Wings sounded close above his head suddenly, and Harry spun. He saw a gull, diving, which became a woman, falling. And he saw Karkaroff on his feet, his wand aimed, anger terrible on his face.

He saw the moment when the Slicing Curse that should have cut into his unprotected back took Honoria across the stomach instead, as she tumbled between him and the line of the spell.

In a moment, everything changed. Honoria lay on the ground, bleeding, cut open from shoulder to groin, organs steaming slightly in the cold air. Harry recognized the Curse—he’d last seen it when Rabastan Lestrange had used it on Connor in the lake last year—and he felt very cold. He raised his head, eyes raking from Honoria to Karkaroff.

Karkaroff turned pale at the feeling of Harry’s magic rising, or perhaps just the look in his eyes; he was a Legilimens, after all. He backed away one step, then two, then screamed, in a voice amplified by the Sonorus spell, “Retreat! Now!”

The night rang as those Death Eaters who could still Apparate fled. Harry heard the sounds of battle cease, falling into confusion and then shouts that were probably either of surprise or victory.

He could share neither. He knelt next to Honoria, and she bled, dying before his eyes. She had her eyes open, though, and she was smiling at him.

“Why should you—” she asked, with an obvious effort, then had to stop, panting. “Why should you get to have all the fun of taking a curse for someone else?” she asked, as if determined to get it all out in one sentence, and then her head fell back. Her eyes closed.

“Fawkes,” Harry said, his voice distorted by emotions beyond any other expression.

Wings fluttered above his head, again. This time, they accompanied fire, and the crooning song of a phoenix who landed on Honoria’s unwounded shoulder and leaned over her injury. Harry cast pressure charms to hold the blood in, his mind blasted dull and numb with shock. Fawkes’s tears fell, faster than, or just as fast as, Honoria’s breathing slowed; Harry could not decide their relative speeds.

The shock gave way to mourning, cutting at him like a knife slicing through one tendon at a time, and he had to wonder, the words forming in his thoughts as though out of a vortex, Is this the way other people felt when I took the curse for Connor?

He swallowed multiple times as he did what he could to assist Fawkes, which wasn’t much—mostly holding the blood in and knitting a little torn skin back together. Horror and pain together echoed twice over through his soul, both for Honoria and for the thought of Draco, or Snape, or anyone, really, suffering the same emotions on his account.

I didn’t know. Oh, Merlin, I didn’t know. If they really consider me as important as anyone else—or at least as important as I consider Honoria—then that means they felt this. Oh, Merlin.
He heard others arriving, but their voices silenced as they neared, save for whispered conversations that Harry didn’t look up long enough to notice. He did look up when someone knelt down next to him, though, and blinked when he realized it was Thomas Rhangnara, his face for once serious.

“May I help?” he asked softly. “There are healing spells I’ve studied that might prove useful.”

Harry nodded, and Thomas began to murmur in what wasn’t Latin, tracing his wand above the path the Slicing Curse had created on Honoria’s abdomen. Harry watched for only a moment before turning back to his own tasks. He could not tell for certain how much effect they had. He only knew that Honoria was still breathing.

Then he realized that Draco’s hand was on his shoulder, and that Fawkes had stopped crying, and Thomas was saying, “Harry? She’s stable. She needs Hogwarts and your mediwitch as soon as possible, but she’ll survive until we can get her there. Have one of the Malfoys Apparate her. They’re good at that. I noticed when we jumped into the battle.”

Harry sat back on his heels, drew in a breath that never seemed to end, and nodded. He rose, meeting Snape’s eyes, and Regulus’s, and Draco’s. He was alive. He would survive.

Now to see who else was.

Pair after pair of eyes around the circle, and it looked as though nearly everyone was alive. Tybalt’s right arm hung uselessly by his side, but he embraced John with his left, eyes tightly closed with what Harry thought was more relief than pain. Arabella Zabini limped, but her eyes were as proud as ever when Harry met them. Narcissa, though unsmiling, shifted so that Harry could see the burn on her left shoulder didn’t prevent her from moving.

Then the werewolves arrived, with a lioness pacing beside them: Hawthorn, Moony, a black bitch with one ear missing who must be Claudia Griffinsnest, and one other, a golden one. One missing.

Harry closed his eyes, acknowledging the blow of a death, and counted them one more time. Henrietta was there now, too, strolling up with a faint smile on her lips, all five of their brooms floating behind her. She inclined her head when Harry met her eyes. She looked exhausted, but fully satisfied. Harry decided not to ask. She could tell him all the details, if she wanted him to know, later.

“We’ll be going back to Hogwarts,” he said quietly. “First, though, I want to secure Woodhouse against repossession by the Death Eaters.” He glanced around distractedly for his map. Draco held it up on his second glance. Harry smiled a thanks he knew probably looked tired and took it, scanning it for more dots.

He shook his head. Save for names he recognized, and the motionless dots lying out beyond the quadrangle, there was no one in the valley. No Muggles, then. When Karkaroff got wind of the attack, he’d probably moved them, if they’d ever been here in the first place.

They had Woodhouse, though, and that was not a small prize—

Though not worth someone’s life, his conscience whispered at him.

Harry told it to shut up, since this was war, and lifted his head, closing his eyes. He knew that one of the people watching him at this moment was most likely a traitor, unless Voldemort used the scar connection to get wind of the attack. As yet, he had no idea of knowing who it was, beyond instinctive certainty that it wasn’t Snape, Regulus, Draco, or any of his older allies, and a revulsion against thinking it might be Honoria. Therefore, he wasn’t about to tell anyone how he intended to secure Woodhouse.

It didn’t take long. The spells on the great wooden building interacted with the magic of the valley, in patterns that Harry learned to understand after a moment of gazing at them. He wove wards around Woodhouse, and then across the valley, carefully putting them just outside the patterns of magical interaction already present. The wards were to fire, and tighten into impenetrable shields, the moment anyone but him tried to enter, by walking, Apparition, Portkey, Flooing into the house, or on a broom. The last might have been a problem, but by wrapping the wards entirely around the valley, encasing it in a huge bubble, Harry avoided triggering the spells that would have disrupted the intricate communication between Woodhouse and the natural rock and trees.

This was a truly remarkable place, Harry thought, with interest that he knew would increase when he wasn’t so bloody exhausted. Whoever had fashioned the original wards was a genius. He would have to study it in more detail later.

“How are we going to get out?” Henrietta asked, with a frown in her voice.
Harry opened his eyes, and saw a sheen of moonlight across the valley, binding them in. He smiled slightly. “We can Apparate out,” he said. “But you shouldn’t try to Apparate in after this.”

Henrietta’s eyebrows raised. Harry didn’t give her the satisfaction of an answer. He would have to root out the traitor first, before he dared tell the wards who they could let through.

He turned to Narcissa, only to find that she was already taking Honoria into her arms. She nodded to him. Harry relaxed.

To his surprise, what came boiling up as Regulus gathered his spiders, Fawkes fluttered to his shoulder, some of his allies moved to Side-Along Apparate the werewolves, and he gripped his Firebolt, was not relief, or weariness, but rage.

_Someone warned them. If not for that, whichever one of my Light allies died would still be alive, and Snape wouldn’t nearly have drowned, and Honoria wouldn’t have taken that curse. When I find that person, he or she will be lucky if they don’t suffer Greyback’s fate._

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**Chapter Thirty: Denouement**

“She’ll live for now,” said Madam Pomfrey softly, pulling the sheet up around Honoria and stepping back from the bed.

Harry nodded. He had to bite his tongue to keep from asking if the mediwitch was sure. She wasn’t sure, or she would have said outright that Honoria was going to live. She wouldn’t torment him with uncertainty if there was no reason to do so. Besides, Harry had no doubt that Madam Pomfrey would watch throughout the night and try to keep Honoria alive.

He would have watched himself, but Tybalt, John, and Madam Pomfrey were all staying, and there was someone who needed him more. As the matron went to fetch healing potions for Honoria, Harry turned and met Draco’s eyes. Draco was hovering near the entrance to the hospital wing, now and then staring at one of the beds as if he would like to collapse into it.

“Come on,” Harry said softly, stepping up beside him and offering an arm.

Draco accepted with a single look of gratitude so rich that Harry winced. _Merlin, the things that must be running through his mind right now._

Lucius and Narcissa had already left. Lucius had simply given a single, proud smile when Draco told them about using the Unforgivable, and why he’d used it. Narcissa had touched her son’s cheek, but looked back and forth between him and Harry, and not spoken a word. Harry was not sure if that meant she didn’t think Draco needed to recover, or trusted that Harry would help heal him better than she could.

And that, at least, Harry thought he could do. He’d killed for the first time much more recently than any of the elder Malfoys. They’d be recalling old memories, and probably not much sympathy. They’d try to urge Draco past the fact of this first death before he was ready. Harry would not.

Together, they slowly made their way back to the Slytherin common room. It was late Saturday night, late enough that even the students most bent on excitement had gone to bed, and none of the few slumped in chairs or on couches stirred as Draco and Harry went by. Harry divided his attention between the floor in front of him and Draco’s face. It was hard to see either in the low light of the fires.

They reached their bedroom at last. Harry half-feared Blaise would be waiting up to demand an account of the battle—and his reaction to the Killing Curse probably wouldn’t be a helpful one for Draco’s state of mind—but steady, soft snores came through his curtains. Harry sighed and helped Draco gently into his own bed, then cast a silencing charm and climbed up beside him, kneeling on the sheets rather than getting under them. Draco had his arms wrapped around his chest now, as if he didn’t want to be touched. Harry could understand that.

“How do you stand it?” Draco whispered.

_Progress. At least he would speak about it, rather than Harry needing to drag it out of him._

Harry said softly, “I found it difficult at first. The one it hit me hardest with was Dragonsbane, but Mulciber was—hard in a different way. I tried all the arguments on myself. Necessity. It was the _only_ way to kill him. He would have hurt other people if I
didn’t kill him. He was a Death Eater, so I was doing the world a favor.”

Draco turned his head inch by inch, until he faced Harry. Harry put out his hand in spite of himself, smoothing it over Draco’s forehead and into his hair. Draco sighed, and the tight clutch of his arms around his body relaxed a bit. “And did they work?” he asked.

“No,” Harry said.

Draco frowned and started to move as though he would throw off the touch, then subsided under it. “Then how did you live?”

Harry hesitated. He wasn’t sure *his* way would be the best way for Draco to handle the problem.

“Tell me, Harry. Please.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Because pain doesn’t stop, Draco,” he said. “There are always going to be things to be endured. I just—I think most people live, sometimes, like they’re going to get through the pain or the onerous tasks of daily life into some legendary time and place where they can do nothing but relax and drift in bliss. I know that’s not true. The relaxation does end. The onerous tasks are usually life itself, not something to be pushed aside so you can enjoy life. The pain needs to be got through because it just has to. Putting my head down and pushing is the way I live.”

“Or running in front and dragging the rest of us along behind you,” Draco said, with a slight chuckle.

*Better than I thought,* Harry realized, relaxing. *He can joke. How long was it before I felt like doing that after Mulciber?* The death of Rodolphus didn’t really count, to Harry’s mind, both because he’d been unconscious for so long afterwards and because he’d had many, many emotions to sort out from that night, not just his slaying of the Death Eater. But for Draco, the dominant impression of this battle would be that he had killed for the first time.

“True,” Harry murmured, and then opened his eyes in startlement as Draco pulled at his arm. “Draco, what—”

“Get under the covers with me,” Draco said. “Please, Harry?”

Moving slowly, because Draco’s earlier attitude had indicated just how little he wanted to be touched, Harry did as he asked. The moment he lay down, Draco rolled over, grabbed him, and held him close, shuddering a bit as his arms wrapped around Harry’s waist and back. Harry forced himself to relax, muscle by muscle, and placed his hand on Draco’s shoulder.

“I can’t entirely regret it,” Draco whispered. “And I think I can put my head down and push through like I need to, Harry, as long as you’re here. If she wasn’t dead, you would be. And I would do anything to prevent that.”

Harry shuddered and tried to rear back slightly. He couldn’t move. The warmth pushing in from Draco’s body seemed to have inundated his mind as well. He felt flayed, stripped to the bone, seen. He liked it better when Draco concentrated on himself. But he was too close, and too aware of what this meant to Draco, to do anything but meet the gray eyes staring feverishly into his.

“I love you,” Draco whispered, and then closed his eyes. Perhaps the closeness was too much for him, too. Or perhaps the warmth and the reassurance and the closeness combined with the battle exhaustion dropped him off. Harry heard him lightly snoring a few moments later.

He waited some time, then tried to move gently away. Draco’s arms were so tightly wrapped around him that he couldn’t. Harry laid his head back down, and was immediately pulled in even tighter.

Harry swallowed and tried to ignore the prickling of his skin, the instincts screaming at him that he felt too good and needed to move out of danger *now.* At least he didn’t think he was in any danger of going to sleep. He stared over Draco’s head at his curtains and the underside of the four-poster, and made himself remember the moment when Greyback had vanished from existence.

At least he had been right. There was that meager comfort. His magic *could* do such things, and he had been right to run away and recover his temper rather than doing them to Margaret. If he had looked at her right after he knew that she hurt Argutus, would he have spoken her name, commanded her to meet his eyes? Would she have popped out of existence like Greyback did?

And he *still* didn’t regret killing Greyback. But he would have regretted killing her.

He used the hours when he lay there and could do nothing but stare and think to sort through his emotions, carefully tucking them
He wasn’t bound magically to his newest allies—though, after the battles, the bonds of life debts connected him to Ignifer and Honoria, just waiting for them to claim them—but he had made promises it would be awkward and insulting to break off with no explanation. Insult someone badly enough on the suspicion of a breach, have it not be true, and other Dark families would either stay neutral or attack him because of their ties to the person he’d insulted, whether or not they joined the Death Eaters. A misstep in the dance now, just when he was entering the wider arena of politics, was not something he could afford.

So he would restrain himself. He had always known he had to. This simply added another, excellent reason.

Tight and tame and lashed, Harry smoothed out his emotions, and swallowed them, and made them lie still. He didn’t sleep, but by the time the sun rose and Draco’s arms finally loosened enough for him to crawl out of bed and go back to the hospital wing, he was convinced he’d accomplished something more valuable.

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“Mr. Potter?”

Harry started and lifted his head from his cradled arms. He’d sat a few hours’ watch by Honoria’s bed while Madam Pomfrey got some sleep. Tybalt and John had left for home just after he arrived, still angry and worried, but content to surrender their friend to Harry’s eyes and the mediwitch’s care. The first thought Harry had, on hearing a voice he didn’t immediately recognize, was that it might be John.

But it wasn’t. A man with an oddly-accented voice, oddly familiar face, and oddly ragged white-blond hair stood in the doorway of the hospital wing. His eyes were yellow, and fastened on Harry’s face with—keenness, was the only way Harry could define the emotion. Keen curiosity? Keen rage? Keen interest? Some of all of those.

“Sir?” Harry asked. “Can I help you?”

“I can help you, and that is the more important question.” Now that the man had recognized him, he seemed to relax, and he certainly had no hesitation about striding further into the hospital wing, drawing up a chair, and sitting down next to Harry. “My name is Paton Opalline. Fergus Opalline was my son.”

Harry shut his eyes and winced. He had confirmed, after they had Apparated back to Hogwarts, that the werewolf who had died in Hawthorn’s attack was Fergus, not Delilah Gloryflower or Claudia Griffinsnest. “I am sorry for your loss, sir,” he said softly. “Do you really still wish to help me?”

There was a reflective pause, and then Paton said, “I see that Fergus told you nothing about his family. Well, he may have been ashamed, though what he became was not his fault. He did—Mr. Potter, would you please open your eyes and look at me? I feel odd talking to your bowed head. I assure you, I do not blame you. Fergus made his choice to fight, and he fell in the doing so, willingly, facing enemies. I am very proud of him.”

Harry blinked and looked up. That’s why his hair is so ragged, he thought. He’s chopped it in mourning for his son. Some of the Light pureblood families did that. “I—I don’t understand, sir. I would have thought you would want to withdraw from the war, to not risk getting any more of your family killed. Besides,” he added, “though I know Fergus wanted to help me because I sent him Wolfsbane, I am unaware of any debt you owe me.”

There was a reflective pause, and then Paton said, “I see that Fergus told you nothing about his family. Well, he may have been ashamed, though what he became was not his fault. He did—Mr. Potter, would you please open your eyes and look at me? I feel odd talking to your bowed head. I assure you, I do not blame you. Fergus made his choice to fight, and he fell in the doing so, willingly, facing enemies. I am very proud of him.”

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Paton shook his head. “It’s true that we were planning to keep out of the war at first, because of what we are,” he said. “But now, one of our sons has died for you, Mr. Potter. Blood was given. Willingly.” He paused, but Harry went on staring at him blankly, not knowing what to say. For the first time, he was really regretting not studying the customs of Light pureblood families in depth. He’d spent much more time on the Dark customs, because Lily had simply assumed that the Light wizards would follow Connor automatically, while Harry would need to persuade and bind and convince the Dark ones to become allies. Harry felt very ignorant of everything right at the moment.

The exhaustion and the worry over Honoria probably aren’t helping, he thought, wiping at his eyes.

“What are you?” he asked.
Harry chased a memory for a moment. But no, though he’d read the term, it had always been in the context of historical background, no more important for him to grasp what was happening in the wizarding world today than the names of Muggle kings nine hundred years ago were. Besides, his greatest historical background was in the First War with Voldemort, the one with Grindelwald, and everything else that might pertain to the struggle of Light and Dark. From what Paton was saying, Old Blood was outside that. “Not enough to know what you’re talking about, sir.”

Paton smiled more widely and shook back his sleeves. Then he bent his head and breathed on his wrists.

Harry watched in wonder as a glamour he hadn’t even sensed melted away, revealing Paton’s previously unmarked skin as writhing with tattoos. Harry couldn’t see a pattern to them. They were simply endless dark lines, perhaps deep blue or purple or green, twining and intertwining and making their way up his arms until they vanished into his robes. Harry looked up and saw that similar swirls adorned Paton’s face. There, though, they seemed to move in harmony with his features, forming dark green concentric circles around his eyes, blossoming into swirls of gold and red on his cheeks, dipping into yellow near his chin and blue on his throat.

“What do those mean, sir?” he asked.

Paton sat back with a shake of his head that moved his ragged hair from side to side, looking half-smug and half-eager to explain. “Old Blood, Mr. Potter. We’re part of the fifth dimension of Dark and Light, one that isn’t spoken about so much anymore, with all the debates on free will and compulsion. Peace and war,” he elaborated, when Harry looked at him blankly. “We rarely fight in wars. They kill our family. And we don’t like that. We would rather concentrate on growing.”

Harry eyed the tattoos on Paton’s wrists and cheeks. “And those—those represent your family, sir?”

“Yes, they do.” Paton traced one finger over the gold and red rosette on his left cheek. “One line for everyone born with the name of Opalline, or from the womb of a woman who married into another family, or a female descendant of one of those daughters. Our family is very great, Mr. Potter, because we accepted certain limitations on ourselves. At one point, most of the Light families were Old Blood, sworn to peace, not to war. If two wizards did have a conflict, they might fight duels, usually not lethal, and the punishment for killing a pregnant woman was to be Obliviated, turned into a child, and bound to the family the dead woman had come from. That was as violent as we got. Aurum exilis, cognatio abundans, has been the Opalline motto for sixteen hundred years, the length of time we have been sworn to the Light and have been Old Blood. In gold poor, in blood rich.”

Harry tried to imagine the amount of children a long-lived Light wizarding family intent on producing more children and avoiding conflict might have, and failed. “Why did the other Light families turn away from being Old Blood?”

Paton shrugged, though his face darkened with a shadow of old anger. “They wanted money, political power, vengeance—to be able to challenge the Dark pureblooded families on their own ground. Of course there are not as many riches when we give the money we accumulate towards the upkeep, rescue, saving, and protection of our own family, and when we are so many. But we are still Old Blood. We have not abandoned our vows, and in return for that, we have a deep connection such as the others will never understand. There are Opallines everywhere, Mr. Potter. And now that one of our own has willingly given his blood to your cause, we consider you an honorary family member. Blood shed over you rather than blood running through your veins, if you will.”

Harry shook his head slightly. “But if you can’t fight—“

“I did think you would see it as soon as I mentioned it, Mr. Potter.” Paton gave him a deep smile, eyes narrowed and smug. “We are everywhere, and of course everyone knows that relatives gossip. And most of our enemies are unaware of just how connected we stay. Our spy network is unparalleled.” He tipped his head. “That is what I intend to give you access to, Mr. Potter—cousins and second cousins, siblings and half-siblings, children and parents bound together all over Great Britain, Ireland, and Europe. We originated on the Isle of Man, and that is still my seat as family leader, but we did not stay there.”

That’s his accent, then. He’s Manx. Harry grabbed and held on to that bit of knowledge. He wanted to hold on to something in the sliding mist of fatigue his mind had become.

“Your offer is wonderfully generous, sir,” he said.

Paton shook his head. “It is only what you should have, now. When you sent the Wolfsbane, you gave our son the ability to choose peace once again. For that, we would have to thank you. But then he died in a chosen battle, using the beast’s form and the savagery that he could not help having to fulfill a goal of the Light. Mr. Potter, that makes you a part of our family. You enabled
“Fergus to make himself useful and good, instead of sinking into despair.”

“I didn’t know I was doing it,” Harry muttered. He looked over at Honoria to disguise the expression on his face, but had the feeling Paton could still see his blush. Honoria breathed on, oblivious. Harry found himself envying her.

“But that is what makes you worthy of this gift,” said Paton. “I wanted to tell you this, Mr. Potter. We would only fight to defend ourselves—and even then, we prefer to avoid Dark Arts and other magic that would break our vows—but you are one of us, and we can certainly spy for you.” He stood. “Are there any other questions that you wish to ask me?”

“I—no.” Harry thought about saying that he was the one responsible for Fergus’s death, but he doubted that Paton would take that well. And perhaps it was the enemy werewolves who were responsible. Perhaps he could learn to think like that. “Thank you for coming, sir.”

“I will mourn Fergus forever,” Paton said softly. “But I have the living to think of first, all my family. And that includes you now, Mr. Potter. Our letters are open to you, and our hearths and homes, should you ever need them.” He hesitated, and Harry found himself wondering what else the man had to say.

He found out when Paton began in a low, faltering voice.

“Mr. Potter, I have no idea how you truly feel on the matter, as I no longer trust the *Daily Prophet* to report the truth, if it ever did. But my family possesses spells that set aright the wrongs between blood kin. That includes spells that punish parents who do the hideous things that your parents did to you.”

Harry jerked his head up. “Would the Wizengamot or the Ministry consider those spells sufficient punishment to forego execution or imprisonment?”

“They would not,” Paton said. “These spells are means of personal redress, Mr. Potter, justice, not vengeance and not legality.”

“Then, thank you, but no,” said Harry, turning away and leaning down near Honoria’s bed again. He told himself there was a slight change in her breathing. It had sped up a little. Was that a good thing? He would have to ask Madam Pomfrey. He had to learn medical magic. He didn’t want to just kill and wish people out of existence. “I will contact you for other things, though, Mr. Opalline.”

“Should you ever change your mind, I would be most happy to teach you the spells myself.”

Harry just nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and Paton turned and left.

Harry tugged the blanket up over Honoria and then went to fetch one of Madam Pomfrey’s books. He wanted the mediwitch to get some more sleep, still. He might as well use the time for something productive, and begin to study on the means of combating the wounds left by battle curses.

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“Harry. Are you quite well? You look exhausted.”

Harry froze for a moment as Narcissa’s arms closed around him in a tight hug, but then forced himself to relax. He’d sat by Honoria’s bed most of the morning, until Madam Pomfrey awakened, and then left and contacted Narcissa. On the way, and while he waited for her, he avoided Connor, Snape, Draco—assuming Draco was awake yet—and others who could have told that he hadn’t slept. They would only tell him to go to bed, which wasn’t useful. He hadn’t realized Narcissa, who, after all, had seen him just last night, could tell.

“I’ve been to bed, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said, which was perfectly true, and then sat down in the chair facing hers. McGonagall had granted them the use of a small anteroom usually used for private talks between professors and seventh-year students who were going into their fields on leaving Hogwarts. “I wanted to talk to you about the attack last night, and who might have betrayed us.”

He’d thought about it, and decided there was no ways that Narcissa was the traitor. She might abandon him, but she would never abandon or endanger Draco.

Narcissa sat down, eyes still fixed on his face in a way Harry didn’t much like. “You want my opinion on our allies?”
Harry sighed. “Yes. I am tempted to suspect Henrietta Bulstrode, since her magic is so strong she could practically count on surviving the battle no matter how much danger she put herself in, and I distrust her. But perhaps I am letting personal motives blind me.”

“Perhaps,” Narcissa murmured. “I will tell you the reasons I brought them into the alliance, Harry. Perhaps that will help.

“Honororia Pemberley is a skilled illusionist, deeper than she lets on, and more useful. I think you saw that last night,” she added dryly. “I wanted her for her fighting skill, and to show some of the people who might hesitate to join an army of purebloods that you were not at all averse to fighting beside halfbloods and Gryffindors. Ignifer Apollonis, much the same. When she once fixes her loyalty, she does not change her mind easily. She’s resisted entreaties from her family for more than a decade to change her allegiance back, resisted a sterility curse, resisted all the impulses of her childhood telling her that Dark wizards were evil. And she serves as a useful symbol of the alliance’s fluid nature.”

Narcissa leaned back and closed her eyes. “Those were my easy choices. Charles Rosier-Henlin—there was the risk that he might not like you, or might decide that you were not strong enough. But he has invented several new spells that I know of, and I respect his hidden strength. And I think that he is now firmly committed to you.

“Thomas Rhangnara is intelligent, capable of research that might serve us well, a good persuader, and in contact with wizards in India who might be useful if the Dark Lord takes the fight to other countries. Also, his wife Priscilla is a good eye on affairs in the Ministry.

“Mortimer Belville is more important for his family than himself. Speaking of which,” Narcissa added abruptly, opening her eyes and reaching into her robe, “I have letters from the Belville family for you. The battle last night impressed them; it is the kind of test they have been waiting for you to pass.” Harry accepted the letters, wishing he did not feel so much as if they might bite, and nodded. “Edward Burke’s cousins are rich, and there is at least the chance that they will pass money and information along, now that they have seen how well you treat their most annoying relative. They have written you as well.” Narcissa gave him another envelope.

“And Henrietta?” Harry asked quietly.

Narcissa hesitated for a long moment. Then she said, “Harry, I feared that people would think us weak if I did not approach her. She is too obvious a candidate to omit from an alliance, especially one that already contained her second cousin Adalrico. There is a reason that the Dark Lord tried to recruit her. Powerful in magic, notorious for acting in her own interest most of the time but giving everything for those causes she adopts as her own—did you know that she saved Elfida’s life?”

Harry blinked, once or twice. Then he said, “No.”

Narcissa nodded. “Adalrico had angered another Death Eater. I still don’t know for certain which one. In those days, I tried to avoid Death Eater talk and business as much as possible, not wanting Lucius’s Lord to think I should be Marked. At any rate, he invaded Adalrico’s house and tried to kidnap or kill Elfida while she was pregnant with Millicent. Henrietta, however, likes Elfida, even if that does not extend to liking all the things Elfida values. She had set up spells to warn her of such an occurrence, unlikely as it might seem to happen. She arrived in some manner that was not Apparating—Adalrico has never been able to explain that to me properly—and utterly destroyed the Death Eater. Adalrico told me that he found a layer of flesh, blood, and bone exactly one inch thick coating every surface of a particular room.”

Harry winced. He didn’t know what Dark magic Henrietta might have used to achieve that particular effect, but he could envision the results all too well. “I had no idea she liked Elfida.”

Narcissa shrugged. “She sees no reason to announce it. But I thought that was another reason she might agree to join us, once she heard that Elfida was in the alliance and bound to you formally. She is extremely dangerous, Harry. I will not lie to you about that. She will find every way of fighting a bridle and rein that she can. But if she decides that she likes you, there is no one I would trust more at your back.”

“No Draco?”

Narcissa smiled slightly. “My son is a special case. Draco more, then. But no one else. She is magically stronger than Lucius, and more deadly than Severus, because she does not possess his scruples. I think it extremely probable that she might have betrayed you, though I did not believe she would go quite this far. But if she did, it was likely as part of a test. If you pass the test, she will be a step closer to deciding to join with us completely.”

Harry frowned. “There were odd gaps in the counterattack,” he said. “They only sent seven flyers up to strike at us, and I would
think there would be more, since Henrietta was there, and they’d want someone to counter her as well as me. I’m surprised Karkaroff didn’t come himself.”

Narcissa nodded. “They took out the Muggles, but they did not lay an effective ambush. Curious, when they seemed to know most of the details of our attack. They were not surprised by the fact that we struck from three directions, for example. And they sent inexperienced werewolves to face Hawthorn and the others, when they should have had Greyback and his mate there.” Harry flinched at the mention of Greyback’s name, but Narcissa didn’t seem to notice. “Perhaps, Harry, the traitor left deliberate gaps in his or her communication.”

“But we can’t know that, can we?”

Narcissa bowed her head. “No. We can’t. Perhaps it was someone who meant to betray us, but was simply ineffective about doing so.”

Harry scowled. He couldn’t think who would have done that. Some of his allies were more intelligent than the others, there was no doubt about that, but they’d all been present at the meeting and known the details of the attack on Woodhouse. They could have given all sorts of damaging information away. Karkaroff, with advance notice and the time to summon more Death Eaters to the site of the battle than Harry would have fighters, should have crushed them. Harry’s magic might have been the only thing to tip the balance.

Perhaps the ineffectiveness was on Voldemort’s side, he conceded. But there is no way to know that, either.

“I’ll be constructing some double blinds,” he told Narcissa. “But you think there is no one I should remove from the alliance just yet?”

“That is your choice, Harry,” Narcissa murmured. “Now, for example, that Burke’s and Belville’s families have responded to you, you could remove them from the alliance by a few slow and careful rituals. I would not recommend doing that with Henrietta. She would take it as an insult, and she would almost certainly strike at Draco or your brother in retaliation.”

Harry gnawed his lip for a moment. Burke and Belville were both good enough fighters to go into two battles and come away unscathed. He supposed he should at least consider retaining them for that.

But if one of them betrayed us, got Honoria injured and Fergus killed...

Harry swallowed and shoved down the rage. He really did just want to let go, to let his fury-filled magic fly, or to haul the likely suspects in and use Veritaserum on them, but he recognized the lure, and the danger, of that path. Those were the kinds of decisions Dumbledore had made, when he first decided to start sacrificing principle and conscience to necessity. Harry would not walk in his footsteps.

“Double-blind for now,” he told Narcissa. “I’ll tell them I’m planning an attack I’m really not, and see if I can catch them out by what Voldemort’s forces do in response to that information.”

“That is probably for the best,” Narcissa said, and sighed. “At least I can say that I do not suspect our Light allies. Laura Gloryflower would be incapable of an act that endangered fighters of your age, and Hawthorn will vouch for her fellow werewolves.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy.”

“Narcissa, Harry. I did grant you permission to call me by my first name.” Narcissa’s voice was abruptly full of compassion. “You do not yet feel comfortable enough to do so consistently. I have faith that you comforted my son after the battle. Did anyone comfort you, Harry?”

Harry stiffened and lifted his head. “Of course, madam. Draco did.”

Narcissa studied his eyes. Harry stared back. What he said was nothing but the truth, and he willed her to see that.

“You always get more formal when you want to shut someone out, Harry,” Narcissa said.

Harry clamped down on his shifting emotions, the impulses to get angry or explode into denial. They were only the results of his exhaustion following a long night of battle. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said. “I am tired, I’ll not deny that, but I am glad that as many of us survived unscathed as did, and I’ll be happier having something like the traitor’s identity to dig into. How is the burn
Healed already. Poppy Pomfrey is a wonder with a wand.” Narcissa stood and hugged him again before he could move away. “Please promise me that you’ll slow down a bit today, Harry,” she murmured into his ear. “Your health is very important to all of us.”

Since Harry had nothing more strenuous planned than a little more watching by Honoria’s bedside, he nodded readily. “I will, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Narcissa kissed the top of his head and stood to seek out the Floo connection she’d used to enter Hogwarts. Harry stood to make his way to the hospital wing.

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…must remember that mediwizardry on the Slicing Curse is delicate work. There is typically so much knit skin to be stitched together, and such significant blood loss, that several people are necessary to save a victim’s life, unless he or she is brought immediately to the attention of a mediwitch or Lord-level wizard skilled in the healing arts.

Harry scowled over the top of the book at Honoria. “You were damn lucky,” he told her. “And I need to learn more about healing magic.”

“Harry!”

Before he could even put the book down, Connor engulfed him in a hug. Harry hugged him back, more than a little startled. It was true he hadn’t seen his brother so far that day, but it was only noon as yet, and he assumed that Connor would have gone to get news of the battle from someone else if he were already awake. Otherwise, he really would have had a faceful of excited brother some time earlier.

“How did the battle go?” Connor demanded in a low voice. “Is she a casualty?” He glanced sideways at Honoria with a look of undisguised curiosity.

Harry nodded, his heart lightened by Connor’s presence. His brother was still a child in important ways, hence Harry’s leaving him behind, but he was also alive in an impatient, restless manner that tugged Harry out of himself entirely. “Yes. She took the Slicing Curse for me.” Connor shuddered and turned slightly green, no doubt remembering his own experience with that one. “As for how it went, well, the werewolves went in first, the way I told you they would—"

He talked for several minutes, doing what he could to pierce together his disjointed impressions and the fact that he had to surmise, not just tell, what some of his allies had been doing, since he didn’t know for sure. Connor divided his attention between Honoria and him. His face likewise alternated expressions, awe and shock and envy.

When he got to the part about wishing Greyback out of existence, Harry hesitated, but then plunged on. If he couldn’t tell his brother about it, then who, out of the people who hadn’t been on the battlefield, could he tell?

“You just wished him gone, and he was?” Connor stared at him, the sunlight through the windows turning his hazel eyes to sparks of shocked fire.

Harry nodded.

“But that’s—” Connor shook his head. “Could Voldemort do that?”

“I don’t know.” Harry stifled a yawn. “Maybe he could, but he prefers to do other things instead. After all, Greyback didn’t bleed to death or leave a surprised-looking corpse, and sometimes those seem to be Voldemort’s main criteria for a nasty spell.”

“Tell me more!” Connor leaned on Honoria’s bed and listened to him.

Harry had just about finished the attack when Honoria took a jolting breath. Harry sat up at once. “Madam Pomfrey!” he called.

The mediwitch came bustling in, took one look at Honoria, and smiled. “There she is,” she said. “Her body’s magic has joined in fighting the Slicing Curse. She’ll live, Mr. Potter.”

Harry closed his eyes as a wash of deep, rich gratitude overtook him. “Thank Merlin,” he whispered. “Can I let Tybalt Starrise
and John Smythe-Blyton know, madam?”

“Only if you tell them to stay at home.” Madam Pomfrey shook her head chidingly at him. “She won’t be able to have that many visitors for a day or two yet. In fact, now that she’s rounded the corner, I’ll have to ask you boys to leave.”

Harry held up his book as he clambered out of the chair. “And I can borrow this?”

Madam Pomfrey looked at him quite oddly, as if she found his choice of reading material strange, but nodded. Harry stood, stretched, and headed to the Owlery, so that he could send Hedwig with the message. Connor bounced beside him, silent but obviously full of the battle.

“Harry,” he said, when they were about halfway up the Owlery steps.

“Hmmm?” Harry was busy thinking about Slicing Curses and shields to counteract them. One thing that made them so dangerous was the expanse of the spell, the invisible blade that sliced a wizard or witch with wide wounds, and could completely evade a narrow Haurio shield not placed just right, or even most Protego ones. Harry thought there ought to be a way around that. Maybe a potion would work better than a shield.

“Do you think I’ll be able to follow you to the next battle?”

Harry turned and leaned against the wall. He should really eat something, he supposed. Lack of food and sleep, the heavy book, and the running around he’d done made him dizzy. But right now, he needed to fix all his concentration on Connor’s face, and give him an honest answer.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Not yet.”

“I did learn a few new spells with Snape,” Connor protested.

“I know. But not yet.”

“When?”

Harry thought. It wouldn’t be fair to set a marker of his brother besting himself or Snape, or even someone else. Harry didn’t know how well Remus’s skill, for example, compared to the average Death Eater. He was not about to let Connor die just because he could beat Remus but couldn’t beat Karkaroff. There was someone’s word he could trust, though, as long as Harry talked to him about it.

“When Snape says you’re ready.”

Connor’s face fell. “He won’t. He hates me. The way he treated me in our Friday session—“

“How?” Harry snapped, straightening. Damn it, I asked for this thinking they’d able to work it out. Connor comes around if you treat him fairly, and Snape cares enough for me that I assumed he’d try. “What did he say?”

“Called me a child. Said I wasn’t ready. Took points off Gryffindor for not trying, when I was trying as hard as I could.” Connor clenched his fists and scowled.

Harry adjusted the hold of his left arm around the book and sighed, his anger draining. “Connor, he says things like that all the time in Potions class, and you can ignore him there. The thing is, he really thinks you aren’t trying. He told me that.”

“But I am!”

“I know,” Harry said soothingly. “I’ll speak to him and tell him that, but for right now, you should probably ignore him. If he gets more cutting, then I’ll speak to him again. I promise. All right?”

Connor muttered something, then said, “It’s just that I love you, Harry, and want to be there for you.” He looked up with an unhappy expression that made Harry’s heart melt. He tossed the heavy book in the air, let a Levitation Charm catch it, and looped an arm around Connor’s shoulders as they walked the rest of the way up to the Owlery.

“I know,” he said. “I do know that, Connor.” Merlin, how hard it must be to just assume you’d have a role in the war and then get spanked by the near-loss of your brother in your first battle. And I was the one who put him through that pain that I suffered
when Honoria was dying. “And I promise that the chance will come soon. But I love you, too, and I want you to be safe. All right?” He put his hand on his brother’s shoulder, turning Connor to face him.

Connor nodded, jaw set. Harry hoped he was resolving to work harder and not to annoy Snape.

He called Hedwig down and asked her to carry a message to Tybalt, smiling as she hooted in the affirmative. He borrowed quill and parchment from Connor, since he was so brilliant he’d forgotten to bring them, and scribbled a quick note, including the warning from Madam Pomfrey. Of course, Tybalt had been a Gryffindor, so he probably wouldn’t heed it, but Harry had done what he could.

He’d just lifted his arm for Hedwig to fly away when an unfamiliar owl circled down to him. Connor glanced over curiously from the other side of the room, where he was playing with Godric, his black eagle-owl.

“Who’s that from?”

Harry shook his head, frowning. The envelope was blank, and the owl took off the moment he freed the message, without waiting for a reply. Harry murmured, “Finite Incantatem,” and concentrated hard on the letter, looking for any trace of magic, any charm or glamour that might hide something nasty. In the end, he hovered it in front of his face and tugged it open without using his hand.

The envelope contained a folded piece of parchment and a smaller one. Harry caught the note as it fluttered to the floor, and raised his eyebrows at the writing on it.

*Should you wish to reply, simply send an owl with your answer to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. It will reach its destination.*

Unsigned, and the hand wasn’t familiar. Harry frowned and turned to the letter itself.

He had only to read the first two words before he stopped, his heartbeat sounding in his ears like a slap. He knew that hand, well enough.

“Harry?” Connor was moving towards him now, one hand out. “You’ve gone pale.”

Harry shook his head and used his magic to fold the letter tightly, into a small ball. “From Evan Rosier again,” he said dully. “Another useless warning, bragging about how he would have commanded the battle. I don’t want to read it right now.”

Connor’s face softened. “Probably wise.”

Harry nodded, and tossed the ball of the letter casually behind him. Another Levitation Charm caught it and slid it into his robe pocket. He managed to carry on the pretense of a normal conversation with Connor, and even go down to lunch with him, though he was aware of the letter all the while, burning like an Ashwinder egg against his hip.

The letter was from James.

Harry had no idea what to do with it.

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**Chapter Thirty-One: Snape Is a Git**

Snape was happily criticizing Hermione Granger’s Draught of Peace—it was rare that the know-it-all Gryffindor made a mistake, and he thought it was beneficial for her to hear his opinion when she did—when Harry’s cauldron exploded.

Snape whipped around, staring, though his eyes quickly narrowed. The atmosphere around Harry had grown more and more tense this week, building up to a physical and magical attack by several people Harry refused to name as he was coming back to the Slytherin dungeons on Wednesday. Harry had said only that he’d hexed them with results that wouldn’t become visible unless they attacked him again. It was the kind of thing that threatened to drive Snape quite mad.

But if someone had made Harry’s cauldron explode in the middle of Potions, where Snape could take House points off the perpetrator—
It seemed that no one had, though. Harry stared at the cauldron and wiped at the mixture of hellebore and powdered moonstone that covered him. Snape doubted he would have been so unobservant as not to see whatever trick or mismatched ingredient had dropped into the potion, and where it had come from.

On the other hand, the idea that he had made a mistake was even more inconceivable, considering that Harry had already mastered O.W.L.-standard potions, like this one, with ease.

“Potter!” Snape barked.

Harry looked up at him, still blinking.

“Do you know what mistake you made?” Snape said that even as he looked into Harry’s eyes, instinctively using Legilimency as he did so, searching for some sign of a name. Harry looked down and broke the contact of their gaze, but not before Snape had seen intense, gnawing worry, of the kind that he’d had no idea Harry was feeling.

“I stirred in the moonstone in large clumps, sir, and didn’t watch them well enough,” said Harry quietly. “They stuck together, and then they reacted badly with the syrup. I’m sorry.”

Snape frowned. It was the same error Finch-Fletchley had made five minutes ago, resulting in him having to leave the class. At least Harry hadn’t taken the blast of the potion full in the eyes. “Clean this up and brew it again,” he said, and turned away. He wasn’t about to take points from Slytherin, especially when Harry hadn’t made a mistake like this before.

The Ravenclaws in the back of the room muttered, but shut up when Snape glared at them. That House was still the most hostile to Harry, and Snape was of the private opinion that the people who had attacked Harry on Wednesday were Ravenclaws—though, of course, he didn’t know that for certain, as Harry refused to give them away. Snape had tried to watch for subdued Ravenclaws on Thursday, but everyone was subdued in his classes, so that didn’t help.

Now, though, he had a candidate for the mistake. Harry’s own worry had probably caused him to focus more on internal matters than the moonstone clumps. Now Snape had only to find out what he was worried about. Harry was coming to talk to him after Connor Potter’s dueling session that evening. Snape would be as patient as he could, but he was determined to get the truth out of Harry.

When he can’t make Potions, something is seriously wrong.

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“Come,” said Snape, eyeing the door in resignation. It said five minutes after eight, and he had entertained the hopeful vision that Potter might not show up that evening. Then he could have the double pleasure of catching up on his marking and giving Harry’s brother detention later.

I will take my pleasures where I must, he thought, as the door opened and Potter stepped inside. “You are late,” he said. “Five points from Gryffindor.”

Potter trembled for a long moment. Snape sneered and watched him. Strange how the son who looked less like the father had come to represent the hated James Potter more for him. Snape saw the same deficiencies in Harry’s brother as in James—the quick enthusiasm at the start of a project that faded when he had to put effort forward, the tendency to sway to others’ opinions, the foolish bravery that meant he dreamed more of going into battle than the training necessary to prepare for it or the consequences of what followed after.

Slytherins are more sensible. We think of survival before glory. Snape stood and drew his wand. “No explanation for your lateness, Potter?” he asked.

“I lost track of time,” said Potter, and then added, “Sir,” as if he had needed to think of the sentence in discrete pieces. Given how slow his thoughts moved, Snape thought that entirely possible.

“I see,” said Snape. “Perhaps I should give you a means of keeping track of it, then.” He flicked his wand, ignoring Potter’s efforts to raise a shield. He was adequate at the Protego, but he hadn’t yet learned the anticipation that should let him have it up before his enemy launched the spell it was meant to deflect. “Densaugeo!”

The curse, of course, hit Potter, because when did he ever have a shield up in time? Snape was glad, for the first time, that he was not teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, though he was sure he would have prepared the students better than Lestrange, who
concentrated too intensely on philosophy. He could not have stood to see Potter fail day after day.

He watched clinically as Potter’s teeth enlarged, extending almost down to his chin before they stopped growing. “A simple
curse, Mr. Potter,” he said. “And yet it prevents you from intoning some spells clearly. Your enemy can use it to stop you while
he finds a stronger spell that you may be not prepared to counteract. And to insure that you pay attention, you will be left like that
until the end of our class or until you manage the countercurse, whichever comes first.”

Potter glared at him again, and Snape felt the first hatching tinges of power attacking the air around him. He raised an eyebrow.
He had not thought the boy capable of wandless magic at all, and perhaps he was not. This could be the instinctive anger response
of any wizard of this age cornered in an unfair situation, provided he was powerful enough to leak anything beyond his body.

*The boy does have potential. But he refuses to exercise it. He wants to argue, to have a sense of fair play, to work through
demonstration after demonstration instead of realizing that I am training him for war.* Snape clamped his teeth together to keep
from saying something about that.

Potter muttered something, carefully keeping his tongue back from his teeth, and a Tripping Jinx formed and flew at Snape. Snape
created a *Haurio* shield without a thought and captured it.

“Stronger spells,” he said. “Unless you are content to make your enemy dance a jig while he tries to slice you open. *Confundo!*”

Potter promptly staggered, eyes going glassy. Snape felt free to shut his own eyes and give a long, gusty sigh, since he knew that
Potter, under the influence of the Confundus Charm, was in no state to notice. *Stars above, how in the world am I going to train
him?* Much fun as mocking and taunting the Gryffindor was, much as he sometimes wanted to hurt him for having grown up with
love in the same household where Harry had known nothing but manipulation, he wanted a strategy that
worked. Trying to
humiliate him didn’t inspire Potter to focus his wandless magic. Offering explanations did nothing; Snape had explained over and
over in every session the importance of creating a shield at once, and still the boy didn’t listen. Insults and belittling, the technique
he used in Potions, self-evidently didn’t work.

*I want to succeed at this,* he realized abruptly. *Just as I wished to act on emotions rather than my grudge against James Bloody
Potter. I want to be able to train Connor Potter for Harry’s sake.*

Grimacing, sickened at the thought of how sappy that sounded, Snape turned back to Potter. He would not remove the *Densaugeo*
curse, for now; he had said he would leave it on, and he didn’t want Potter to think he didn’t keep his word. But he lifted the
Charm, and Potter blinked in several directions, then blushed hotly.

Snape ignored that. “You see that a spell does not have to be an Unforgivable to confuse the victim,” he said. “Many people,
when Confounded, will do things that they otherwise will not do. There is a shield that can be worked into the hair around the
skull to defeat such mental magic. It is difficult, but I believe you have the raw power to do it.” And how *that* galled his tongue,
but it was true. Snape could have been more patient if Potter was weak. He was not, though nowhere near as strong as Harry or
Draco or even the Granger girl.

Instead, he was strong, and did nothing.

Snape stopped the path of that thought. Potter was already looking at him as if he had grown a second head. A moment later, he
said, voice slightly blurred by his elongated teeth, “But why would you do that? You *hate* me.”

“I am doing it for the sake of the war,” said Snape, deciding that Potter did not need the comparison to his brother for right now.
*See, Harry, I can be careful of the brat’s feelings when I try.* “I will show you the spell. I know that we can work together,
Potter,” he added, throwing caution to the winds. “You proved that when you showed me the letter your father had written to you,
and said that you wanted me to use that as evidence in charging your parents with the abuse of your brother.”

Potter shook his head. “That was about Harry,” he said. “This is about me, and I don’t think you’re really trying to get over your
hatred of Gryffindors. At least Harry’s in your House.”

Snape had never responded well to self-pity in Gryffindor voices, and he did not do it now. “I want competent students to train,
Potter,” he said. “I know that I am not going to get them in Potions. Most of you are too impatient, too unintelligent to respect the
finer points of the art.”

Potter had the nerve to roll his eyes at him. “And I suppose that’s why you criticize Hermione all the time, too,” he said. “Because
she only *thinks* she’s smart, and not because she’s a Gryffindor.”
“She responds to the pushing,” said Snape coldly. “In this class, I know that you can do more than you are doing right now. I insist that you do it. Have a shield raised when you come through the door, you stupid boy. Accept the help of specific spells. Be aware that I will strike at you, and strike again and again, and that my strikes are still more measured than you will encounter in battle. Part of any wizard’s duel, or a meeting between two wizards in the field, is creativity. Some call it by other names, speed or imagination or intelligence. But I have seen quite dim wizards take out stronger and more intelligent ones—"luckily, he wanted to say, or you would have no chance at all"—because they were better able to anticipate their opponent’s spells, and come up with ones that they had no counter to.”

“Like Quidditch,” said Potter. “And anticipating the dodges of the Snitch.”

Snape beat down the urge to roll his eyes in turn. Whatever analogies the brat needed… “Yes,” he said.

“But I have instincts there,” said Potter. “I don’t know what to do in a duel yet. That’s what you’re supposed to teach me.” He gestured at his long teeth. “Not just curse me and leave me like this.”

Snape laughed, and saw Potter flinch. Well, he’d meant to make him do that. His laughter was not a kind thing. “Death Eaters will leave curses on you that will make this look like a love tap, Potter,” he said. “And they will last days, not hours.”

“That’s why I’m here!” Potter shouted at him, and Snape really had to repress a snort at the way he sounded. “Because I want to know how to resist that. You’re supposed to be teaching me that, too.”

Snape drew in one breath, and then another. When he spoke, his voice was cold and soft, and Potter leaned closer to hear in spite of himself. “I know what I should teach you, Potter. I am perfectly aware of how to survive a war. I fought in the first stage of the one you seem so determined to win. And I will teach you with the methods that I deem to have the best chance of success.”

“Really?” Potter folded his arms. “None of them seem to have worked well so far.”

Snape told himself that Harry would not understand if he Transfigured the stubborn imbecile into a stick of celery and cut him up for use in a Fresh-Breath Potion, no matter how tempting it was. “Stop being afraid of failure, you stupid boy,” he said. “Stop thinking you know everything already. Stop concentrating on your hatred of me, and instead trust that I know what I’m talking about. So long as you have some other goal in mind than mastering this magic, your wandless power remains caged, and your focus is poor.”

Potter perked up. “I could do wandless magic?”

“Perhaps,” said Snape, stressing the word. In truth, he was not sure that the power hovering around Potter’s body indicated the ability to work wandlessly. Sometimes the magic never did manage to narrow down to the single point needed to do even the simplest of spells. Potter might just have raw potential instead, meaning that his curses would be unusually powerful, or a talent like Parseltongue hiding and waiting to be discovered. “But you will never know if you do not trust me and work with me.”

“Can you do wandless magic?”

Snape was not about to entrust a secret like that to a loose-tongued Gryffindor. “I have seen Dumbledore do it,” he said instead. “And Harry.”

Potter’s eyes lowered, but not before Snape had seen the conflicting emotions in them—love, and jealousy, and longing.

*Envies his brother, does he?* Snape fought the urge to snort. *I imagine he has forgotten the details of the abuse. He sees only the end result. Something should happen to remind him shortly.*

He saw no point in bringing it up right now, though. He wanted to actually accomplish something with this training session, so that irritation with it would not clog up his mind when he spoke to Harry at nine o’clock. “Shall we continue?” he asked, picking up his wand.

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“How did it go?”

Snape kept his back turned to Harry for the moment, while he ordered tea through his fireplace. He could hear Harry settling into the chair on the other side of the room, and then shifting uneasily around for a moment. Harry always did that when they met in his private rooms, as though he were bewildered by the lack of places to hide.
Snape turned around and met his ward’s eyes, though he saw nothing as revealing on the surface of his mind as he had seen in Potions. Harry had his Occlumency shields up now, hiding his thoughts. Snape resisted the impulse to snarl. He was the one who had taught Harry to do that, after all. “Your brother is impatient, and wants to join battle already,” he said.

“Yes, I thought of that after Sunday.” Harry leaned back in the chair with a pensive frown. “He sounded as though he wanted to go along to battle without really understanding what it was about. And I thought he would have got some idea, after he went with us to the beach.”

“And did absolutely nothing,” Snape pointed out, taking his own seat on the couch. A house elf appeared a moment later with two cups of tea, one of which Snape accepted with a grateful sigh. Harry shook his head when the elf tried to offer him the other one. Snape frowned, but let it pass. Harry was in one of his vates moods, that was obvious.

“Maybe that’s it, then,” Harry said. “Maybe he wants to prove himself, not just get glory. Connor’s always more stubborn about making up for a past failure than about making a new stride.” Snape listened in silence to the fondness in his voice. He had to wonder if Harry would have cared about Connor at all without the forced affection from his training. They were simply too different, and Harry spent most of a conversation about him forgiving or excusing his brother’s faults. “How is he progressing?”

“Not well,” Snape said. “He wants to do more than he is currently able to. He accuses me of being unfair. He thinks he knows better about what I should teach than I do.”

“And you’re never unfair?” Harry asked that in a wry tone, but his gaze was anxious. Snape knew Harry would accept what he said, and so he answered with the truth.

“I very often heap insults on his House in my mind, but only in my mind. The worst I have ever called him is a stupid boy.”

“Professor——“

“You came to me for help in training your brother, Harry,” Snape broke in. “That does not mean I can change my nature.”

Harry sighed. “I know. Just—I think I should speak to him. I assure you he is trying, but he probably doesn’t think the same thing about you. May I mention some of the knowledge you have to him, so that he knows you’re definitely the best candidate for teaching him?”

“Do not mention that I can do wandless magic when I am angry. That is a weapon I prefer to keep to myself.”

Harry nodded. “I won’t.” His hand moved down to pat a pocket of his robe in what looked like a habitual nervous gesture. Snape’s eyes narrowed. *If that is a nervous habit, it is a newly-acquired one.*

Harry drew his hand back in the next moment, and said, “I suppose we should work on blocking the scar connection. I’m still getting flashes of dreams from Voldemort—nothing definite now, but for all I know, he could overpower my mind whenever he wants. And he’s getting stronger again.” His face reflected grim resignation for just a moment, and then that dropped away and he simply looked anxious. “What do you suggest I envision for a shield, Professor?”

“Something light and flexible,” Snape murmured, staring at Harry’s robe pocket as if that could make the cloth transparent. A small object; it didn’t make the pocket appear unnatural. “Perhaps the quicksilver of an Occlumency pool will be best.”

“Grass?”

Snape brought his eyes back to Harry’s. “Why that?”

Harry hesitated too long, and then said, with too much force and brightness, “We flew over long grass when we brought the brooms down near Woodhouse. I keep remembering the way it swayed in the wind, but hid the werewolves crouching in it. I want a barrier that can move, but will conceal what’s on the other side of the scar connection from Voldemort.”

Reluctantly, Snape nodded. He wondered if the association with grass—or the memory of the werewolves springing?—was what troubled Harry, but he would not yet ask. It was absolutely imperative that Harry block the scar connection first. Then, if that relaxed him enough, Snape would try to get him to talk about whatever was bothering him.

“*Legilimens,*” he murmured, eyes locked on Harry’s, and then he slid forward and into the welcoming darkness of air around a steel skeleton covered with the thick, bushy leaves of emotions.
Harry showed him the scar connection, a twisting void between two of the metallic branches, communicating the dimensions of the tunnel and how hard it was to block without words. Snape answered in the same way, showing, rather than explaining, how to weave a thin, flexible barrier across the opening. It was similar to an Occlumency pool, but Harry could retrieve his emotions from those at a moment’s notice. This had to be a little less responsive to the Occlumens’s will, so as not to open and expose the thing it barricaded during normal dreaming. Now that Snape thought about it, a visualization of grass would work very well. It moved with the wind, but it took a lot of wind, or the work of digging hands, to uproot it.

Harry spun soil into being, and lowered the long blades gently into place, spanning the whole of that starless pit that bound him to the Dark Lord. Then the skeleton shifted a bit, reaching out and grasping the sides of the hole so as to provide a resting place for the grass. Snape nodded. It was a good practice, one of the reasons that wizards’ minds were so often of a piece, like a single house or forest, rather than a hodgepodge of unconnected pieces; if the barrier looked too unnatural, it would be harder for Harry to imagine and maintain.

Snape floated backward, withdrawing from Harry’s mind, and then caught another glimpse of that dark worry again, thrusting through the Occlumency pool that had tried to contain it like reeds through shallow water.

He hesitated, then reached out and explored the edges of it. He would not try to learn specific details, like the names of the students who had attacked Harry, he promised himself sternly. But if more than one problem troubled his ward, then he should know about it.

All the worry focused on one thing, though. The moment Snape let his own awareness brush the edge of that volatile emotion, he knew what it was.

He snapped open his eyes and held out a hand, his rage acting to fuel his wandless magic, even as Harry desperately clapped his fingers over his robe pocket. “Accio letter!” Snape snapped, and the little ball of paper rolled out of an uncompressed corner and soared across the room into Snape’s palm.

“Stop it!” Harry shouted, leaping to his feet. Uncontrolled rage blazed in his eyes, and a wind whipped the fire hard enough that it went out, leaving only the torches to illuminate the room. “You have no right to read that, no right—”

Snape ignored him. Until and unless Harry actually attacked him with magic—and having seen how well Harry had restrained himself after the arrests of his parents and Dumbledore, he really had no fear of that—he did not need to defend himself. Instead, he unrolled the letter from James Bloody Potter and read it.

October 6th, 1995

Dear Harry:

I know that you won’t want to hear from me. But I have something very important to tell you. I can only hope that you read this letter through to the end, because of how much it matters to me.

I’ve learned a little information about the trial; they tell us if we ask, and sometimes legal books on child abuse are among the ones that appear on the shelves in my cell. And I’ve learned that sometimes it’s possible for the accused to be tried on partial charges. That means that some of the charges against me could be dropped, even though not all of them would be. I wouldn’t ask you to try to get all of them removed, but there are thirteen charges of neglect against me. Even dropping six or seven could mean the difference between death or the stripping of my magic, and simple imprisonment.

Could you try, Harry, please? For me? I know that I haven’t done right by you in the past. I’m very sorry for that, and I’d like to try anew. If I went to Tullianum for five or ten years, then we could talk, and as long as I still had my magic when I got out, we could try to lead a somewhat normal life. I have messed up my second chances before, but I swear, I swear to you in the name of Merlin, this time I won’t. But the thought of dying or losing my magic weighs on my mind every day. I can’t do much but sit here and shiver. It was an effort to write this letter. As long as I knew that I would live, and get out of prison someday, then I could make plans for that future, and be happier and healthier and more productive.

Please, Harry. Try. For the sake of the family we could be together someday.

Your loving father,
James.

Snape realized his hands were shaking as he finished the letter. There was no danger of some sappy emotion being the reason they
shook, of course. He was in that dreamland beyond fury, where his anger expanded beyond his body and rattled items on the shelves. When he had entered this mood as a Death Eater, then he killed, efficiently and painfully and with a bloody, wild joy. The tension building up within him now could be released only by death.

“You had no right to read that.”

Snape came back to himself long enough to notice that Harry had taken his seat again and sat with his head hanging. His voice was dull and resigned, and he flinched when Snape stood, the concern he bore somewhat counteracting the urge to cause pain and draw blood.

“You hadn’t read it yourself,” Snape said. “Why?”

“Because I knew I would have had to write back,” said Harry, jerking his head up and snarling at him, the resignation vanished. Fury lit his eyes a complex green, and his lightning bolt scar flared on his forehead, as though they hadn’t blocked its connection after all. “And I promised Mrs. Malfoy that I wouldn’t communicate with my parents.”

Snape felt a distant surprise that Harry had managed to keep that promise. The letter rang in his head, though, and he had to bite out the next words. “And why didn’t you come to anyone and tell them about this letter? Draco? Me? Your brother, for Merlin’s sake?”

“Because I knew this would happen, damn you!” Harry stood. “I knew you would get angry! And some of it would be at me, and some of it would be at James, and either way results in someone getting hurt, and I’m so angry at him!”

Snape jerked himself to a stop. This was the first thing he could remember Harry voluntarily confessing about his feelings for his parents, other than his insistent desire to forgive them. Snape breathed slowly, even as he kept his voice cool. “And you could not have put the letter in a drawer? Someplace it would be safe?”

“I always wanted it with me.” Harry ran his hand through his hair and paced back and forth. “I was afraid someone would find it if I left it behind. But I hated that, too. It feels like he’s a chain around my neck, always with me. Why can’t he leave me alone?” Those last words sounded as if he’d scraped his throat raw in saying them.

“He can, Harry,” Snape said softly, treading as carefully as he could. “He will. When Scrimgeour learns that the letter somehow got out of James’s hands when he was already in custody—“

And Harry swung towards him, and Snape knew he had pushed too far. The glimpse into Harry’s emotions vanished as he sealed the crack that had produced it. He glared, and the letter soared from Snape’s hand to his without a word spoken. Then Harry bowed his head and read it. Snape did not quite dare to interrupt him.

“Typical,” said Harry when he finished, with utterly no emotion in his words. He rolled the letter up again and put it back in his pocket.

“Harry—“ Snape began.

“No, I’m not going to try and get the charges dropped,” said Harry. His voice was wooden. “And I promise that I won’t send a letter back. I promise to you, as well as Mrs. Malfoy, that I won’t do it.” He made for the door.

“I am not as concerned about that as I am about your mental health,” Snape said to his back. Since he knows what I’m after already, I might as well bare all my motives. “When you begin making mistakes in Potions, Harry, then something is badly wrong.”

Harry swung around. “I won’t do that anymore,” he said, with the force of a vow. “I’m sorry for doing it today.” Snape nearly flinched, knowing Harry meant he was sorry for providing any hint of his emotions at all, rather than as an apology for disrupting class. “It’s fine now.”

“It is not,” said Snape forcefully. “This is why I wanted you to speak to someone, Harry. I am willing to fetch anyone you wish, except one of your parents or Dumbledore. Regulus would—“

“Fetch who you want,” said Harry, locking himself down behind the calm mask that Snape remembered from his first year at Hogwarts, and had always hated. “I’m not talking about it.”

“Why?” Snape asked.
“It’s mine to keep,” said Harry. “I told you that. Everyone knows what happened. That’s fine.” The choke in his voice immediately afterwards revealed how much he still hated it. “But they’re not going to know how I feel about what happened. That’s mine.”

Snape could think of nothing to say. He had never been good at this part of comforting. When Harry had been more unconscious of his own reactions, he thought as he watched his ward leave the room, even insistent that he hadn’t been abused, things were actually easier. That meant he exposed all sorts of telltale signs with a careless word that to him meant something else, or a flash in the eyes that he didn’t know he was giving out, or his simple expectation that someone else would agree with his twisted notions of love, sacrifice, and forgiveness.

Now, though, Harry knew how other people saw him, and he had partially healed, and he knew the cost of that healing. Now, he was jealously guarding his secrets, and Snape didn’t know how to get through the walls. Manipulation and lying were distasteful to him where Harry was concerned—he had gone as far as he ever wished to in that direction with his lies of omission about possessing Dumbledore’s memories and what he intended to do with them—but he knew of no direct assault that would work.

He sat down and stared into the cold hearth.

**Must I hurt him again, if that is the only way to get him the help he needs?**

******

*How dare he?*

Harry was halfway back to the Slytherin common room before that thought, or a variation of it, stopped running through his head. He halted, leaning his brow on the cool stone, and breathed carefully. Wet scents came and curled through his nostrils. Harry forced himself to think about them, about what would happen if water came flooding through the dungeons—would anyone even notice the difference in scent in time to escape the torrent?—and finally, gradually, relaxed.

Then he went about the more difficult process of reconciling himself with what had happened.

*He saw it. It was probably inevitable that he would the moment I invited him into my head to firm up the Occlumency barrier. And I was slipping more than I thought, if I let my worry affect my behavior in Potions. Harry sighed. He’d fobbed Draco off with the idea that he’d slipped in Potions because of a flash of a vision from Voldemort, and told him that he was going to Snape tonight to block the scar connection—which did happen to be true. He felt bad about lying.*

But the fiery panic that he felt at the mere thought of sharing any of his true and churning emotions overruled even his scruples there. He would tell Draco anything else, including his worries about how well Snape and Connor were getting along in their extra dueling lessons. This was the one thing no one else could have, though, the one thing no one else would ever have.

*Snape keeps urging me to be a little more selfish. You’d think he’d be pleased.*

Harry gave a rusty chuckle at that, and smoothed the ground where he’d buried his feelings one more time. So. Someone knew about the letter from James now, and he didn’t have to worry about keeping that secret. He’d be all right. He would. He would still ignore the temptation to write back. Anchoring the promise to Snape, who was here with him in Hogwarts, would help with that.

But he would not ignore the temptation to hope. James had learned, it seemed. He no longer spoke of being set free entirely. He just didn’t want to pay an unfair price for his crimes. He wanted to make sure that he still had a future when he got out of Tullianum, so that he could dedicate his life to his sons.

Harry let his stiff shoulders fall back into position, and sighed. He had changed his mind about going to the Slytherin common room, though. He wanted to fly. Granted, it was after nine at night and he wasn’t supposed to be outside the walls after dark, but he wouldn’t go beyond the wards. This would help clear his head and make him an easier person for Draco and the others to be around tonight.

He slipped easily through the halls, wrapped in a Disillusionment Charm, and *Accio’d* his Firebolt once he had reached the Quidditch Pitch. When it came to him, he climbed onto it and kicked off, rising swiftly into the night. He shivered as the high cold burned through him. He hadn’t brought Quidditch gear or a glove, of course.

But that was all right. He wouldn’t stay out long. He lay down along the broom, stabilizing himself to compensate for the loss of
his hand, and turned his face up to watch the waning moon. The Firebolt flew in lazy circles.

He kept his mind on physical sensations, on the cold and the sounds, both odd and natural, that drifted up from the Forbidden Forest. His breath plumed in front of his face, and Harry watched the clouds of steam as long as he could, until the darkness insisted on breaking them up. The moon hunched like a crabbed old man, and Harry counted the craters he could see on his face. He almost remembered a fey tale he’d learned as a child, about Merlin and the battle he’d fought with the man in the moon, but he refused to remember it. That would drag up memories of Lily and James and—the other things.

He was yawning and thinking he should go down when he saw a small shape circle through a beam of moonlight. Harry blinked and sat up. Had someone come after him? Draco was the only one likely to, and he would have called out before he reached that height.

The other flyer sped past him again, and this time Harry could see that it was far too small to be a wizard on a broom. In fact, it had visible wings, and was about the size of a phoenix. He hovered, watching in interest as it drew nearer and nearer. Was this a species of magical creature, perhaps, come to ask him a question as vates?

The creature finally came close enough, and seemed determined enough, that Harry thought he could risk calling a ball of light into his palm without frightening it. The moment the golden glow winked into being above his hand, the creature altered its path and came straight for him.

Harry recoiled. This close, he could see that the creature was unnatural. It did look like a bird, but its beak had teeth, and each feathered wing, twisting with iridescent colors like the shades spilled on a patch of oil, bore a crown of three claws. Its feet folded close to its breast, powerful, clawed things bigger than most raptors’ talons Harry had seen. Its long tail was a lizard’s.

But it was the aura around it that really made it ugly. Harry could feel its magic spreading out beyond its body, invisible but very present. That magic was a vicious, violent thing, seeking to rend and kill.

He swerved. The bird swerved with him, impossibly fast, and lashed out as it soared just above his head, setting Harry coughing with the foul musk from its feathers. The claws scored five ragged lines down his left cheek.

I like/hate you, snarled a voice that resembled a Dementor’s as much as it resembled anything, drilling like a spike of cold into Harry’s head. I love/loathe you.

“What are you?” Harry insisted, no longer doubting it was intelligent. He shivered as the blood stopped flowing from the cuts almost at once; they were freezing shut. He whirled back upright, and saw the bird turn in the night to face him, using its tail for balance. Its eyes were red. It laughed at him.

Guess, it said, and then it flew straight up into the sky and vanished in the darkness and moonlight. Harry scanned for it, flying into the space where it had been, but found nothing. It might have been a purely magical creation.

Harry shivered, and gingerly touched his face, wincing when his fingers encountered icy scabs. He supposed he should go see Madam Pomfrey, and then would come the multiple explanations.

He sighed, and circled back down towards the school. At least it’s reminded me that there’s a world beyond myself again. I can be grateful for that.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Two: Spells That Leave No Mark

Lucius gave a long, luxurious stretch—rather, he thought, like a cat prepared to go hunting. Well, he did not resent the comparison. Cats were noisy and foul-scented enough that he would never tolerate one in the Manor for long—Draco’s Kneazle kitten when he was a child had been enough of a burden—but in the abstract, he could accept the idea of grace, and speed, and beauty.

And deadliness to mice.

He checked his preparations carefully one more time. He had the cage of insects. He had the knowledge of curses burning in his head and on his tongue. He had the blank wand. He had the requisite amount of trust in Auror Wilmot to make sure that things went as planned.
He finished the check, and blinked lazily.

*Time to go a-hunting.*

******

“Welcome, Mr. Malfoy.”

Lucius smiled into Wilmot’s eyes as he held out his hand for a shake. The pale, hazel-eyed man clasped it with no sign of hesitation, and ignored the small flinch Lucius wanted him to feel at his touching a halfblood. He simply shook, and then moved back to his desk and shuffled through some papers.

“As you know, Mr. Malfoy, the new laws that may make an impact on the activities of Dark families are really quite simple to follow—”

Lucius listened, and smiled and nodded in all the right places to convince someone passing by that this really was all he had come for. The cage of insects sat at his side, glamoured to look like a bag of papers. The blank wand lay in his pocket. He thought more about them than information he had already received from his own contacts in the Ministry long before the laws reached this stage.

Wilmot continued talking, producing more sheaves of paper and shuffling through them with droning enthusiasm. Most of the people who walked past looked at Lucius with pity for being caught up in the Auror’s talk. Lucius managed to ignore those glances easily. In fact, he wanted to laugh. Wilmot was a near-perfect actor, and if anyone suspected what Lucius was really here for, he would eat his own hand.

Abruptly, he realized that Wilmot’s voice continued, even though the man had stood and reached for his wand. Lucius arched an eyebrow, and raised it higher when he realized that a complicated illusion was in place that maintained images of both himself and Wilmot in their chairs, nodding and chattering respectively. He stood, carefully scanning his own copy. It looked no different than the one he saw in the mirror every day, save for a certain blankness behind the eyes.

“Triggered spell,” Wilmot explained, when he saw Lucius looking at him. “It needed a certain amount of time to pass before it could take our likenesses.” He waved his wand and murmured a simple glamour spell under his breath, one, Lucius knew, that would not trigger the Ministry’s wards into thinking a prisoner was escaping as a Disillusionment Charm would. In moments, Wilmot’s features melted and changed into those of a drab Ministry flunky Lucius wouldn’t have looked twice at, and from the tingle in his own cheeks, he suspected the same thing had happened to him.

“This way,” Wilmot said softly, and walked towards the lifts.

Lucius followed, inwardly exulting in the effectiveness of Aurelius Flint’s spy network. Whatever debt Wilmot owed to Nott, it must have been enormous, to make him take so many risks in smuggling Lucius in to torture the Potters.

There was, of course, the chance that Wilmot would betray him later, but Lucius doubted that. Others in the Ministry owed debts that could, with a bit of pressure, be transferred to Lucius. Those others would keep an eye on Wilmot for him.

As they rode the lifts down, Wilmot murmured, “You trusted me to make arrangements to insure you would not be caught. They are done, Mr. Malfoy. And I think you will be pleased with the one who takes your fall.”

Lucius gazed into his face, finding it hard to estimate, as always, what the real emotions were like under the glamour. “Who is it?”

Wilmot told him.

Lucius gave a little chuckle. Sometimes, he enjoyed being surprised. This surprise was a pleasant one, given what inconvenience the person was currently causing him. And Wilmot was right in the explanations he gave for his choice. Everyone would believe that this person would torture the Potters.

*I could become fond of Wilmot. An intelligent friend in the Ministry, one who managed to survive Scrimgeour’s first purge of the Aurors, is a useful thing to have.*

******
“Here we are.”

Lucius raised his eyebrows when he realized there were no guards on the cells. He had assumed that Wilmot would arrange to have the usual guards bribed or drugged or otherwise out of the way, but no one appeared to have been here for at least five minutes. Wilmot smiled at him, a mysterious smile that said he valued his own secrets, and cast the spells that unlocked James Potter’s door and took the glamour from Lucius’s face.

Lucius lifted the cage with the insects and stepped within. Behind him, the door shut and locked again. Lucius was unconcerned. He knew spells that would make Wilmot regret leaving him in here if he tried it, and Wilmot knew he knew them. It was always so pleasant to understand one’s associates. In fact, Lucius was more than usually pleased with the world today. He did hope that wouldn’t affect the way that he planned to torture James Potter. He would hate to think he was being kind.

The cell was too large for someone who had committed Potter’s crimes, and too soft. James lay curled on the bed in one corner, his shoulder hunched. He tensed a bit when he heard the door open, but didn’t turn to see who it was. Lucius had no impression so strong as that of a sulky child, trying to convey the impression of stern strength in ignoring intruders. In reality, of course, the impression James conveyed was of a pouting lip.

Lucius set the cage on the floor and removed the glamour. Then he said, “Hello, Potter.”

James sat up and whirled around. The ghost-like pallor to his face told Lucius that he’d recognized his visitor. He had to swallow several times before he could say anything, though. Lucius watched the performance all the way through, finding it immensely entertaining. He wondered if James often demanded water from the guards, whether he had to work up to all his speeches the way he was working up to this one, and whether he would say anything worthwhile when he did finally speak.

It was not so much a surprise as a disappointment when he didn’t. “I’m not afraid of you, Malfoy,” he tried.

“Of course you’re not.” Lucius pulled the blank wand from his pocket. It came to life in his hands with a soft *thrum*. This was part of the task it had been made for, and it would perform the spells required of it for that task, then go dead. Thus Lucius avoided any suspicion of using his own wand, which he’d been required to register when he entered the Ministry. “That’s why you’re shaking, Potter. It happens to be cold, with a high wind, in here. Why not fool yourself, since you have been doing so for so long?”

James all but vibrated, leaning forward and just catching himself as he was about to tumble off the bed. “You can’t do anything to me, Malfoy. Do you realize what would happen if Harry found out? If Scrimgeour found out?”

“Yes,” said Lucius. “Probably better than you do, since I know both your son and the Minister, while you have hidden behind your own ignorance for more than a decade.” He touched the cage with the blank wand. The bars went transparent, though they didn’t open as yet. The insects inside began flinging themselves madly against the front. Lucius wondered how long it would take for James to notice them. “That is why they are not going to find out.”

James gave a long, liquid snort. “You can’t possibly disguise whatever you intend to do, Malfoy.”

“Yes, I can,” said Lucius softly.

James went on, undaunted. Or perhaps he thought that if he ignored what Lucius said, the problem would go away. That was his *modus operandi*, from what Lucius understood of him. “I’ve just written a letter to Harry. He knows me better than you do. He understands the good in people. He’ll come save me. You shouldn’t be here when he comes, if you know what’s good for you, and he could show up at any moment.”

Lucius’s amusement froze, and then cracked and fell away. He didn’t change his expression, of course. He did not wish to do so. The news that James Potter had written *their* Potter filled him with rage like dry ice, and then pleasure as cold as the amusement had turned.

“James Potter,” he said, “abuser of children, coward, imbecile, disgrace to the name of pureblood wizard, this will be a positive *pleasure.*” He tapped the front of the cage with the blank wand, and murmured the incantation that released the insects, stepping out of the way as he did so.

A deep buzz filled the room as the insects soared free, a whirling swarm like that of mosquitoes, though much bigger. They swirled twice, wavered as if they would head for Lucius—though he wore a repelling charm already—and then oriented on James.
“No,” said James, though he couldn’t possibly know what they were.

Lucius didn’t bother to respond. He savored the shocked and horrified look on James’s face just before the starving insects dove at him.

Hundreds of small crooked legs bearing barbed pincers on the end hooked into James’s flesh. He screamed as the long beaks lowered and hooked in after them, but Lucius knew no one would hear him; the cells bore Silencing Charms to prevent the prisoners from annoying each other. Lucius stepped slightly to the side, to get a better view, as James half-vanished under the black cloud, all the while screaming in horror and pain.

Then the insects began to shrink. Lucius closed his eyes to savor the way James’s cries lifted, soaring. The pain did not vanish when the insects dug in, of course. It became keener, from hundreds of pinpricks to hundreds of red-hot irons, all focused on an inch of skin or less.

When he looked again, Lucius had the treat of seeing the insects pass into James’s body. They slipped through pores, they turned into smoke and wafted in through his eyes and nostrils, they kicked into his armpits and burrowed in. The holes they created vanished as they went inside. The pain would stay there, but there was no sign of bites or stings. Strictly speaking, what the insects had fastened on was James’s magical self, and not his physical one.

James stopped screaming and stared at his unmarked arms in bewilderment. Lucius leaned on the wall, smiling. He wasn’t surprised when James raised his eyes to him and snapped, “What the fuck did you do to me? What was the point of that?”

“You have no idea,” Lucius said pleasantly. “And it will stay that way.”

In truth, the insects were coursing through James’s bloodstream now, blending with his tissues, becoming part of his body in the way that his bones were. They would search out some sign of Dark magic. That was how the healers of the past had used them, to eat curses that no ordinary mediwizardry could take care of. Most victims suffered no pain when the insects dug in, since the curses offered them food, and the healers would remove the bugs the moment their task was completed.

James had no Dark curses on him. The insects had to burrow into his magic instead. They would search every corner of him, but when they found none of the food they preferred, they would make their own. James had just become home to a thriving colony of insects whose presence would go entirely unnoticed and unremarked for a year, perhaps two.

Then the disturbance in his body would manifest as cancer. Lucius rather suspected that it would appear full-blown in every part of his body cancer could appear in, that he would experience horrible pain, that he would know he was going to die for several months on end—intolerable to a coward like him. The Healers would shake their heads, but they would not be able to tell the difference between a natural and magical cancer. By then, there would be no trace of the insects to be found. And why should anyone suspect or look for them, when it was entirely uncommon for the insects to be used in medical practice anymore?

James Potter would die now. Lucius rather hoped the Wizengamot would leave him alive, and condemn him to Tullianum. A few short, miserable years, and then death inevitable and undeniable. If the Ministry cut that short with one of their painless executions, Lucius would be annoyed.

At least he had the anticipation to savor, and the belief that the Wizengamot would not hand down a death sentence. James had only been charged with neglect. They were less likely to think that that crime deserved one.

James said, “Of course I’m going to tell Harry about this. I don’t know what you did, but he will. How in the world do you think you’re going to get away with this, Lucius?”

“I didn’t give you permission to call me by my first name, Mr. Potter,” said Lucius. “And I prefer getting away with it to having you know what I have done. Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of unpleasant anticipation of pain in the future.” As James opened his mouth, frowning, Lucius aimed the blank wand at him and added, in a casual voice, “Obliviate.”

James’s face went slack, and he blinked. Lucius said softly, “You’ve been asleep. You had a painful dream, but that’s nothing unusual for a man accused as unfairly as you’ve been, is it? I think you should go to sleep, James, and not quite remember what the dream is about. It would be best.”

James dropped to the bed, limp as a doll, and rolled over. Lucius stepped backwards and tapped on the door in the prearranged pattern that let Wilmot know it was time to let him out. The cage floated behind him as he stepped into the hall, and Wilmot reset the locking spells, all the while darting curious glances at Lucius.
"He’ll suffer," was all that Lucius thought it necessary to say in response to that glance.

Wilmot nodded, and then let him towards Lily Potter’s cell. Lucius felt pleasure stretch in him like a cat in the sun, and smiled as the first curse twitched behind his lips.

She did more. She will suffer more. And no one will suspect me. This has all the ingredients of a wonderful afternoon.

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Lily sighed. She knew this was a dream, because of the softness of the ground beneath her feet and the incredible, surreal richness of the sky over her head, but that didn’t stop her from wishing it were true.

In the dream, she stood on the lawn outside their old home, the house at Godric’s Hollow, and watched Connor play. He was skipping a stone across the pond, cheering as it went further and further with each try, and laughing as the chips of mica in the stone bounced the sun back. It was such an innocent game. No one was hurt. Lily could not help thinking that Connor was inherently better than other children, but surely it helped that he had been reared in such peaceful surroundings, not taught violence. It was love that would defeat Voldemort, and Connor knew love.

Harry stood beside her, watching his brother in silence. Lily turned and gazed down at him. He was taller than this now, she knew, but then, Connor was a child, so Harry could be a child—in body. He had never been a child in mind, not since she started training him and he started understanding the importance of his task. He turned his head up and looked at her, and contentment shone in his eyes. He knew the real importance of the prophecy. Yes, he had been the one who deflected the Killing Curse and destroyed Voldemort, but the heart, the core, the thing that would win the war, was love. So even though he knew the truth now, he was still content to yield place and precedence to his brother. He could remain in the background because he was ultimately less loving than Connor.

Lily ruffled Harry’s hair, and listened to Connor’s laughter, and fought against the remembrance that things had ever been different. She would have to wake up sometime, but why, oh why, did it have to be now? All the world was wonderful again. She had been right. Her sacrifices were acknowledged and agreed with. There was no son turning against her, no strange and savage knowledge that she might have been wrong staring her in the face, no one telling her that she had abused her children when she had simply done what she could to prepare them for war. She liked this dream.

“Mum?”

Lily smiled down at Connor. He hadn’t spoken in that particular needy tone in years, since he had decided that he was a big boy and could take care of himself. “Yes, Connor?”

“I have something to show you.” He held out the flat stone he’d been skipping, so that Lily could admire the way those same flecks of mica that had flashed the sun back were shifting and changing. “See! Do you think it’s accidental magic, or something else?”

“Let me see.” Lily bent down to look, adoring the warmth of the light on her face and the sweet scent of her son and Harry’s silent presence at her back. This was life, the life they all should have had. This was reality.

Connor smashed the stone into the side of her head.

The shattering of her dream was almost worse than the intense pain that flooded her. Lily felt herself drop, and then she lay on the warm grass, staring up at Connor. Behind her, she heard Harry laugh, as he never did. The laugh was mocking, and Connor smiled the same way as he stood over her, bouncing the bloodied stone in his palm.

“Why?” Lily managed to whisper, and then she coughed on blood that shouldn’t be there, not when all she’d taken was a blow to the side of the head.

“But I hate you,” said Connor, his smile gone and his eyes suddenly narrow with dislike. Lily felt her heart break. Connor’s eyes were hazel, just like James’s, and looking into them now was like having James hate her, the way he might if he knew about Harry’s training. “You didn’t prepare me for war. You kept me innocent all along. And now I’m so far behind, and struggling to catch up, and Merlin, I just hate you!” He gave a loud sob, and then knelt beside her and smashed the stone down again.

Lily couldn’t move. Dimly she felt more and more smacks, the shattering of her skull and the spattering of her brains, but the keener sensation was Harry’s laugh, which she heard for all but the very few moments before death claimed her.
Lily awoke and sat up with a gasp. She was in her bed in the cell at the Ministry, and for the first time ever, she was grateful to be there. She shivered, gripping her arms and bowing her head.

“Potter?”

Lily looked up swiftly, then relaxed. An Auror had entered, but this was one of the guards who had always been kind to her, slipping her extra food on the sly and never making fun of her for not being able to use magic, the way some of the others did. Her name was Elizabeth, and now she regarded Lily with wonder and unease in her brown eyes, slowly lowering her wand.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“A horrible dream,” Lily whispered. She said it with such emotion in her voice, emotion she hadn’t even known herself capable of, that Elizabeth tucked her wand away altogether and came to sit down beside Lily, smoothing her sweat-soaked hair off her forehead.

“It’s all right,” Elizabeth whispered. “That takes people, sometimes, near the trials. And of course you’ve been having more than your fair share of nightmares.” Lily took comfort in her anger. It wasn’t right that nightmares from a curse had tortured her, was it? And after all she had given up for the war. It was no more right than the fact that neither of her sons ever visited her, than the twisted idea Harry had that she’d abused him because she wanted to. She hadn’t wanted to. It was a choice between sacrificing him and letting the world fall into darkness. It was only due to the training he’d had that he could face Voldemort at all. And she would have done everything differently, anyway, if she’d known at the time that Harry was the one who had deflected the Killing Curse. He would have had training because of his powerful magic, but she would never have thought of him as a potential Dark Lord.

A dull axe cut into the back of her neck.

Lily gasped and tried to stand, but Elizabeth’s arm curved around her, keeping her right where she was. Lily stared into the Auror’s pleasant face and smiling eyes, and then suddenly realized it was a mask, a glamour. Someone else was under the glamour—Auror Mallory, who had arrested her and made her life a living hell when she first arrived here. Lily screamed.

Mallory laughed, and held her still as the axe rose and then cut down again. It took a long time. A human neck was thick, and when an executioner wasn’t committed to doing his task properly, it might take as many as fifteen cuts to slice through all that flesh and bone and muscle…

Lily counted twenty-two cuts before death came for her, as a mercy.

******

Lucius fought to still his twitching lips as he stood in a corner of Lily Potter’s cell and watched her experience her visions. The Neco Identidem curse linked his mind to hers, and let him see, if he chose to, exactly what she was feeling and thinking as the spell went into operation. Currently, she had died five times, and she was starting to notice and suspect and dread the death the moment she awoke in another dream. Lucius had to admit he was a bit impressed at her creativity, though by far the most rewarding part of this whole curse was her fear as she perished. That really was what dying was like. Lucius admired his own creativity, too. Even if the Wizengamot sentenced Lily Potter to execution, as Lucius thought would most likely happen, she could only die once. That was not enough to pay for her crimes.

And then an idea occurred to him. A delicious idea. An idea he knew he could put into motion, though it would mean giving up the repetitions of the Neco Identidem curse and the other mental assaults he’d planned. Lucius straightened and stared at Lily Potter.

There was also the chance, the smallest and most infinitesimal chance, that an Auror experienced in Dark Arts would sense the spell, and Auror Wilmot’s fall wizard was not someone who would use this particular curse. It could lead to Lucius getting caught.

He was a Slytherin. He weighed the risk of being caught in his head against the smallness of it, and the pleasure it would give him to enact this revenge, and the binding that his family had to Harry Potter. Then he nodded.

He would roll the dice.
He raised the *Neco Identidem* curse, and Lily Potter whimpered and slid into true sleep. Lucius smiled, distantly, even as he began to move in precise, controlled gestures. She might as well remain asleep for this portion of the invocation. Lucius was not about to tell her its purpose, anyway.

He extended the blank wand above his head, and whispered, “*Lamnae cruore adoleo.*”

The air trembled in front of him, and the knife-blade formed, gleaming, near his left arm. That meant Lucius was ready for the sacrifice he had just promised to make. If he had not been sincere, the knife would never have formed at all.

He turned his arm sideways, and the skin split. Lucius felt fire trace its way up his veins. He didn’t flinch. Cold followed it. He might have been a statue. The knife filled the cut with spiky, jagged pain, and still Lucius did not move, staring at the blade, the knowledge of what he would accomplish with this spell, this ritual, this sacrifice, obviating any response to the agony.

At last, he bled. The knife turned, catching the blood on its blade. Then it hovered, still, in place. Lucius would have to enact the second part of the spell himself. Everything about this ritual was a choice, with multiple chances to turn back. The wizards who had created this particular branch of Dark Arts had wanted to insure that only the strongest reached the end and achieved the desired results.

> “*Concedo adflictationem me,*” he murmured.

Then he had to close his eyes and stand still as his entire body tingled and went numb. All sensation ended. He could no longer feel the pain from the cut, the blood trickling on his skin, the knife pressed against the wound, his heartbeat against his chest. If he moved, if he panicked, the spell would break. He had to wait as the knife drew his own pain into it. When he opened his eyes, at last, and a tendril of sensation began to return, the knife glowed a brilliant yellow, pregnant with pain.

> “*Adflictationem indigeo annalis,*” he said.

The knife trembled. Lucius felt brief, whip-like spikes of magic brush past his head. The summoned power might decide to obey him, and it might not. In that moment, his dedication to the Dark was measured, and his commitment to his revenge, and his motive for seeking that revenge. No one but a Dark wizard desiring vengeance could cast this spell. Lucius stood in silence and endured the inspection. He was confident that he would pass muster.

The knife turned and flew to Lily Potter, scoring a shallow cut on the back of her neck. The yellow light flowed from the blade into the wound. Again she whimpered, and again she failed to wake.

Lucius closed his eyes, and relaxed. A simple healing spell took care of the cut on his arm, and he slid his long robe sleeve—specially fitted to hide the Dark Mark from casual view—back across it. No one should look for it. This spell was not exactly common, precisely because it was so hard to cast.

As he watched the agony pour into the woman who had abused a child with Lord-level magical power, he was satisfied. He had asked for as much pain as the spell would grant him. He would have been within his rights to ask for more, he thought, considering what had happened to Harry, but he would then have had to use a ritual that required objects he didn’t have with him and which had a much higher chance of both failing and getting him caught. Few people would look for this. The cut was hidden by Potter’s hair. The wand that had cast the spell was not his own.

And another had agreed to take the fall.

The last of the yellow light vanished from the blade, and then the knife, too, dissipated. Created by the spell, it could not last past the effects of the curse. Lucius stretched his arms above his head and nodded to Harry’s mother.

> “For bearing the boy my son loves, I thank you,” he said. “For abusing him, I hate you, and always shall.” The words were almost meaningless after all he had done to her, but he felt better for saying them. They disclaimed any hint of a debt that he might owe the woman. When dealing with Dark Arts spells of this caliber, it was always best to be sure that the caster suffered from no ties to the victim.

Lily Potter would almost surely be executed. When she was, the execution would be painless and take only a few minutes in the eyes of anyone watching. Lucius planned to attend it himself.

Now, though, he would have the satisfaction of knowing that, however little time it took in reality, in Lily Potter’s perception it would seem to last for much longer. She would suffer a year of unending pain in the space of those few moments, the stored
agony in her body exploding through her veins. Lucius had given her as much pain as he could imagine her suffering, and that was quite a lot.

He still regretted that he could not have given her a decade of anguish. But that was too risky. He would be satisfied with what he could get.

He woke Potter long enough to cast Obliviate on her and tell her that she would remember only bad dreams, then tossed the blank wand in the air and concentrated on the nonverbal spell that he had told Ollivander to implant into it. The wand burst into flames, and burned away to light ashes that drifted down over Lucius’s face and hands. He brushed them off absently and went to the door. No Aurors looking for traces of the wand that had cast these spells would be able to find them now.

Again, he knocked in the prearranged signal. Again, Auror Wilmot opened the door and let him out, but this time he was not alone. With him was the person he had chosen to take the fall and the blame for Lucius’s actions.

Lucius arched an eyebrow when he saw that she wasn’t restrained or drugged or under Imperius, but looking at him with bright, clear eyes. “Auror Mallory,” he said, and bowed. “I am somewhat surprised to see you here.”

Mallory shook her head. Now that Lucius thought of it, her eyes did have a gloss to them, but it was the look of fever. Whatever fire consumed her came from the inside and the inside alone. “I would not have lasted much longer,” she said. “I longed to hurt them. Now, they are hurt, and I will cast curses to make Rufus believe that I did it. Vengeance is taken, and justice is done.” She paused, as if she had to think about the next words. “I am happy.”

“You know that you’ll be sacked and prosecuted?” Lucius had not really believed Wilmot when he indicated that Mallory was going along with this of her own free will.

“I know.” Mallory looked half-restless, twirling her wand between her fingers. “It will be worth it. I have not been able to stand it, seeing the reporters at the Daily Prophet and even some of the people in the Ministry turning against Harry. I wanted to hurt the Potters so badly, but Rufus forbade it. Well, now I’ll be able to get my wish, and my spells will conceal the greater pain that you dealt them.” Her eyes narrowed at Lucius. “I don’t want to know the details just in case something slips out, but you dealt them pain?”

Lucius nodded. “I did.”

“Good,” said Mallory. The glaze in her eyes had turned to a joyous one as she opened the door to Lily Potter’s cell and slipped inside.

Wilmot locked the door again, and shook his head. “She’s been quite mad for weeks now,” he confirmed, when Lucius looked at him. “She would eventually have gone after them herself, I believe—damn her position and her morals and everything else. They’ll know that she could have; she was the one who sent away the guards on the doors. And as long as she confesses to her crimes freely, they have no reason to try her under Veritaserum and look for further things she might be hiding. Scrimgeour’s too honorable for that, anyway.” Wilmot curled his lip. “Almost the whole Ministry is mad, either for Potter or against him. A few hints, and she took the bait.”

“Well aren’t you mad?” Lucius asked.

Wilmot laughed softly, a barking sound. “I don’t quite feel like giving away all my secrets, Mr. Malfoy.”

“The ones I possess are safe with me,” said Lucius. He had no reason to question Wilmot in such a way as might make the Auror decide he was a threat. He wanted his useful friend to stay safe in the Ministry. “And who do you believe will become Head of the Auror Office, now that Mallory is disgraced?”

Wilmot shrugged as he recast the glamour over their faces and they walked back towards the lifts. “There are several people the choice might fall on. Scrimgeour won’t be able to just make the appointment this time, not when his last choice tortured prisoners. Personally, I think the most likely candidate is Priscilla Burke.”

Lucius laughed.

Wilmot shot him a curious glance. “What?”

“She is a person I approve, though never one I would have thought likely to ascend to the post,” said Lucius. And now we have more and more friends within the Ministry, and someone who will glance the other way as long as we keep our games within
They returned easily to Wilmot’s desk, resumed their seats and their apparent boring conversation, and dismissed the glamours. Lucius rose to his feet a few minutes later and extended a hand to Wilmot.

“A pleasure, Auror Wilmot,” he said ceremoniously. “We shall have to do this again sometime.”

“Yes, we should.” Wilmot clasped his hand and met his eyes with no trace of hiding or flinching. “I have my own reasons to hope that the laws impacting Dark wizards are reconsidered, Mr. Malfoy, and to approve what happened today. I hope that you won’t hesitate to seek me out if you need help again.”

Lucius inclined his head, and then left, the cage that had held the insects bobbing beside him in its glamoured disguise. He had punished the Potters, got rid of a Head of the Auror Office who could have been a thorn in his side as he reestablished his influence in the Ministry, and secured a useful friend for the future.

All in all, it had been a very good day.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Three: Walk a Thin Line

“I just don’t understand how you can do it, Potter, that’s all.”

Harry had a moment to be glad that Draco wasn’t at this meeting of the dueling club, but doing research into his own family background for a spell that he wanted to create. He would have hexed Susan Bones by now. Of course, it was probably only because Draco wasn’t here that Susan had dared to begin the subject at all.

Harry glanced around the room from the corners of his eyes. Everyone had stopped pretending to duel now, and was openly staring at the two of them. Harry stifled the urge to hiss. They needed concentration to get the expanded Shield Charm spells right. No, it wasn’t Dark Arts, since Remus hadn’t been able to be here this evening and supervise them, but it was still a delicate and difficult spell, and they might lose their lives to a Slicing Curse or a similar hex if they couldn’t master it.

And now everybody was staring, even Connor, as though they couldn’t imagine how Harry could find words to answer this accusation.

Harry sighed and turned back to Susan. “Because the son isn’t the father,” he said. “Families are important, Bones. I know that.”

He thought of his parents for a whip-quick moment, and then turned and met his twin’s eyes. Connor took a step forward, one brow raised, but Harry shook his head. He appreciated Connor’s offer, but he didn’t need his brother to defend him. “But you won’t get anywhere punishing Draco for what his father did to your uncle. Draco hasn’t done anything to you. And he’s firmly against Voldemort. He’d have to be, to dare be seen with me,” he added, a bit sourly. Surely Draco’s constant presence at Harry’s side, his actions, should have proven which values he held, even if Susan and the others did distrust every word that came from both Harry’s and Draco’s mouths.

“But his father killed my uncle,” Susan whispered. “And I know that you haven’t spoken up against Lucius Malfoy either, Harry. In fact, some of the rumors say that you’re working with him.”

I should have known it would come to Lucius sooner or later. Harry met her eyes. “I’m sorry about your uncle and your cousins,” he said. “And your grandparents, for that matter. I wish those deaths hadn’t happened. I wish the First War hadn’t happened. But it did, and there’s nothing I can do to take it back. The very most I can do is try to help you survive this one, and defeat Voldemort. I won’t abandon Draco because of his father, and I wouldn’t abandon Lucius unless he tortured someone again. He has changed, Bones. Just as other people can change, you know,” he added, a bit sourly. Surely Draco’s constant presence at Harry’s side, his actions, should have proven which values he held, even if Susan and the others did distrust every word that came from both Harry’s and Draco’s mouths.

“But his father killed my uncle,” Susan whispered. “And I know that you haven’t spoken up against Lucius Malfoy either, Harry. In fact, some of the rumors say that you’re working with him.”

“This is all the same war,” Susan whispered. Her eyes were bright with tears, and she could hardly hold her wand steady. Harry thought that was something she would need to get over if she was ever to make any progress in the war. Too easy for an enemy to spring and snatch the wand out of her hand while she aimed it so ineffectively. “That’s what my aunt said. And she’s the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, she should know. So someone can’t change sides in the middle of a war without getting called a traitor. And I still have to avenge the deaths of my uncle and my cousins and my grandparents. And I can’t fight on the same side as the son of the man who tortured them to death.”
“It’s not like he tortured them to death yesterday, Susan,” said an unexpected voice behind Harry. “It’s not like you even knew them. Give Harry a break, would you?”

Harry blinked and turned his head. Ron was standing there, scratching the back of his neck and wearing an expression that said, “What in the world am I doing defending a Slytherin?” But he didn’t move away, even when Susan turned her teary eyes and shaking wand on him.

“You don’t understand,” she whispered. “My aunt made sure I knew all about Uncle Edgar, how—”

“Yeah, and my mum lost some brothers in the war, too,” said Ron. “To Lucius Malfoy, or at least he was one of the Death Eaters who killed them. Took five wizards to take them down,” he added, with a touch of justifiable pride. Harry nodded. Gideon and Fabian Prewett had been extremely powerful wizards, and some of the first targets of Voldemort’s concerted attempts to remove Light wizards for a very good reason.

“So I’ve lost some uncles,” said Ron. “And yet I’m right here learning beside Harry, and not trying to hex Malfoy. Much,” he said, when Harry glared at him. He had done a fire hex last time that got around Draco’s shields entirely, thanks to Draco’s too-obsessive focus on Harry and a Light pureblood wizard’s innate ability with fire and light, and then been a little too delighted with it. “We need all the allies we can get to win the war, because You-Know-Who is so powerful. I would never ask my mum to fight beside Lucius Malfoy, because she knew her brothers. I never did. They died while I was too young to remember them, or even before I was born. I don’t know the exact year, because Mum doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Well, my aunt does!” Susan caught her breath on a sob. “I feel like I did know my uncle Edgar, and I don’t want anything to do with Death Eaters, or the children of Death Eaters, or the boyfriends of Death Eaters—” She threw Harry an accusing glance.

Harry grabbed the cold fury that wanted to roll out of him. He was glad, now, that Draco wasn’t here. This was the kind of incident that he would exaggerate for more trouble than it was worth, lengthening the whole thing into insults and hexes. Harry had handled the six Ravenclaws who’d attacked him last Wednesday, and he would handle Susan Bones now.

Come to think of it, it’s a good thing that Snape isn’t here, either.

“Do you think Draco is Marked, Bones?” he asked quietly. “Just come out and say so, if you do.”

Susan frowned. “Of course not. He couldn’t hide it. I’m not saying he’s Marked, just that he’s a Death Eater.”

“But a Death Eater would have the Dark Mark,” said Harry, and took a step forward. He could feel every eye locked on him. Last chance to settle this without half of Hogwarts exploding at me. He was well-aware that any action, any word, could be the one that would set the dry grass of hearts and tempers in the school afire. “So he’s not a Death Eater.”

“He thinks like one,” Susan muttered.

“How so?”

“I’ve heard him say Mudblood before.”

“Well?”

“He hasn’t for a month now,” said Hermione firmly, standing up. Zacharias put an arm around her, but Hermione shrugged it off. Harry seized a sliver of amusement, like a thin beam of sunlight, from seeing how much that annoyed Hermione’s boyfriend. “I know. I heard him say it in the hallway between classes, and I gave him a lecture about how it was stupid for him to have those prejudices when he was Harry’s boyfriend and Harry’s mother’s a Muggleborn, and anyway Harry would hex him if he heard him say it. He hasn’t said it since. He always substitutes Muggleborn.”

Harry could feel his eyebrows climbing higher as Hermione recited that. Of course there were things that he didn’t know about Draco’s life, just as there were things that Draco didn’t know about his, but he hadn’t even imagined that something like this had occurred. So far as he knew, Draco’s prejudices remained unreformed, and he just didn’t think about them when he was with Harry, or put Harry in the context of them.

Come to think of it, maybe he didn’t change his mind. But he’s keeping his mouth shut, and that’s a good first step.

“Thank you, Hermione,” he said, and turned and faced Susan. “Well? Do you have any other proof he’s a Death Eater?”

Susan’s face had closed, and she looked away with a mulish expression. Harry relaxed. They were past the most dangerous moment, when Susan might have hexed him and other people would follow her lead or try to defend Harry, and it would all turn
very dangerous. Now the atmosphere in the room was more akin to that of a sulky first-year trying to come up with an insult against snarky seventh-years than dangerous adversaries at each other’s throats.

“I didn’t think so,” said Harry, and glanced around the room, then snapped his fingers. “The club is dismissed for today.”

Groans answered him from a few throats, but most people didn’t seem that upset. People who were with Susan wanted to sneak away and lick their wounds, obviously, or maybe console each other that, pretty words aside, Harry couldn’t possibly be in the right. The neutral Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors just wanted to get out of there; the Ravenclaws had left about the time that Susan started speaking to Harry the way she had. The two Slytherins in the room, Blaise and a fourth-year whom Harry didn’t know well, called Aidan Belby, waited with wands held loosely in their hands while Harry got ready to go.

The real surprise was when he started back to the Slytherin common room, and realized that the Weasleys were walking with him—Ron at his side and Ginny near Blaise. Harry gave them a puzzled glance.

Ron returned him a sheepish shrug and smile. “Just wanted to show you that I meant what I said,” he said. “You’re a Slytherin, and I still think Malfoy’s a git, but you’re right. And not all the Light pureblood families are mad, I promise.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself, and listened to Ginny arguing amiably with Blaise about whether one’s allegiance to Light or Dark really gave one better ability with a certain kind of spell, or whether it was purity of blood or individual talent or just sheer dumb luck. Blaise spoke quickly, with determination, but he didn’t manage to shut Ginny up. Remembering the hex she’d fired last year, when Ron tried to object to her dating Blaise, Harry doubted there was much her boyfriend could do to manage it—other than a kiss, with lots of tongue, which was in fact what he glanced back and saw them engaged in at one point. Harry rolled his eyes and faced forward again.

That was how he saw someone coming out of one of the dungeon corridors just ahead of them, clad in a Disillusionment Charm that made it look as though part of the walls was moving, wand low and a curse coming out of its mouth. “Flagellum cruoris!”

Harry whirled, grabbed Ron, and shoved him towards the wall of the tunnel. Ron staggered, off-balance, his breath coming out in a hiss of pain as his shoulders collided with the stone. Blaise and Ginny were safe on the far side behind Harry, and Aidan was just running up behind them, shouting.

Harry continued the whirling motion, and hissed as he felt the curse take him across the shoulders, cutting a pair of crisscrossing lines. The lines were thin, but they sliced through his shirt and his skin and his muscle, and the pain was equally sharp and thin, as though ants were marching on and biting them. The Blood Whip was one of the few curses that, like Avada Kedavra, had virtually no block or shield. It was too wide for Protego, too powerful for Haurio, and reacted badly, as in causing explosions, with most of the other possible wards and barriers. Harry had trained himself with that curse in childhood, and so, though he hurt now, he was not incapacitated as he turned to face their attacker once more.

The figure had paused in shock, as though it had no idea what to do now that its most powerful weapon had failed. Harry used its distraction to snap, “Finite Incantatem!” and watched the Disillusionment Charm melt away to reveal a vaguely familiar Ravenclaw girl.

“Here, I know you,” said Ron, who’d hastened back to Harry’s side, wand drawn. “You’re Marietta Edgecombe.”

Harry remembered her now; he’d seen her dancing at the Yule Ball last year. Marietta raised her head, her face stubborn. “You can’t say anything,” she warned Harry. “Anything you say could set everyone off, you know it could.”

Harry nodded tightly at her. Slytherin was having enough strained relations with Ravenclaw right now. And anyway, to accuse someone of using the Blood Whip curse was not a matter for a detention and a loss of House points; it meant that McGonagall would seriously have to consider expelling Marietta. And then, too, Marietta was part of a minor Light pureblood family, and a friend of Cho Chang’s. If Harry turned her in for this, he might as well declare open war in Hogwarts’s halls.

“Harry!” Ron protested. “You can’t not report it. Look at your back, for Merlin’s sake!” Ron’s temper was gaining speed and ground, and a few sparks dropped from his wand. Harry winced. When Ron was angry, then his magic became half again as powerful, or at least it did since last year when Harry had helped him break through the block that his rage had put on his spells. “I don’t know what that curse was, but she hurt you—”

“She did,” said Harry. “And she’s not going to do it again.” He cast the same spell on Marietta’s wand that he had on Margaret’s, binding her from using magic against him again. After a moment’s thought, he added in Draco’s name, Argutus’s, and the names of everyone standing with him in the corridor. Marietta’s eyes flashed, but she nodded.
“Probably the best choice, Potter,” she said. “No hard feelings, hmmm?” She gave him a harsh-edged smile. “We both know what’s going to happen, sooner or later.”

Harry did. There would be a maelstrom of fire. Something would set it off, and he would be at the center of it. He let out a long, harsh breath, his eyes locked on Marietta’s. “Was that curse actually aimed at me, or at Ron?”

“I think I’ll let you brood on that.” Marietta put her wand away with almost offensive slowness, looking far too pleased with herself. “It’s going to happen,” she whispered, just loud enough to reach Harry’s ears. “But we both know that you won’t want to push it to happen. Sometimes, Potter, you’re ridiculously good-natured. You could have a lot more if you would just exert your power and your temper.”

Harry said nothing. He watched Marietta go, and slowly, slowly released his tight grip on his magic. He had wanted to respond with an incantation that would turn the Blood Whip back on its caster, doubled in strength. It would have flown right at Marietta, and hit her on the front of her body. She might have had her throat sliced open.

*My magic and my anger are both too dangerous. But when I don’t do something permanent to them, then they get bolder. Harry let a harsh breath travel through his nose. But they can’t make me do what they want me to do. They can’t make me yield to temptation and use my magic without thinking of the consequences.*

“That was stupid,” Ron was telling him angrily, when Harry turned around from watching Marietta go. “She used a curse that ought to get her expelled. And you ought to go to Madam Pomfrey.” His hand pressed gently, consideringly, against Harry’s wounds for a moment, and Harry flinched, his mind suddenly recalled to the pain.

“I know a healing spell for this in one of our Defense Against the Dark Arts books,” he said. “I’ll be fine.”

“Harry!” That came from not only Ron’s throat, but Ginny’s and Aidan’s. Blaise was the only one who seemed to understand, slowly shaking his head.

“Everything’ll come out if Potter goes to the hospital wing now,” he said. “Edgecombe will be expelled.”

“Good!” said Ron hotly. “She deserves to be!”

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“Everything’ll come out if Potter goes to the hospital wing now,” he said. “Edgecombe will be expelled.”

“Good!” saidRon hotly. “She deserves to be!”

And then what will that do to Ravenclaw? Do you want one quarter of the school turned against Potter, Weasley?” Blaise exhaled, his eyes locked with Ron’s. “That’s what we’re looking at right now. If anything’s going to happen to punish the people who are hurting Potter, it has to happen in front of other people—Professors, preferably—and the attackers have to seem like ordinary crazed people, not members of a particular House.” Blaise shook his head. “That’s why they’ve been so careful to keep their attacks small and isolated so far. Except for Parsons, but she was a special case.” He ignored Ginny’s mutter about what kind of “special” Margaret was. “It’s Harry’s word, or Harry’s word and ours, against a Ravenclaw’s. They’re counting on House divisions to help shield them.”

Ron looked murderous, but jerked his head down once. “You just better be all right,” he said to Harry. “And something should happen to Edgecombe.”

Harry frowned, not liking the expression on Ron’s face. “If you attack her, it’ll seem like a Gryffindor attacking a Ravenclaw.”

“I know that,” said Ron. “Don’t you think I know that, now that the High and Mighty Zabini has explained it all?” He ignored Blaise’s scowl. “I didn’t say I was going to attack her. Just that something should happen to her.”

Harry looked long and hard into Ron’s eyes. Ron looked back at him with an absolutely oblique expression that Harry didn’t consider fair. Ron was a Gryffindor, and a Weasley besides, famous for their tempers and their transparency. He shouldn’t look as cunning as any Slytherin right now.

“Make sure you heal those cuts,” he said, and then refused to say anything else until they reached the Slytherin common room, where he nodded good night while Ginny kissed Blaise again. Harry cast a glamour over his back to hide the wounds from the other Slytherins, and stared hard at both Blaise and Aidan as the Weasleys rounded the corner.

“I can count on both of you not to say anything?”

“Of course, Potter, for the reasons I explained,” said Blaise. Aidan just nodded, looking a little sick.
Harry nodded back, then entered the common room. A few people glanced at him, but only with the interest that any passage of Harry’s excited. They went back to their books and their games soon enough. Harry relaxed. With luck, he could find the healing spell and cast it on his back, and no one would be any wiser but the people who had been in the corridor.

His run of bad luck wasn’t over yet, though. When he and Blaise entered their bedroom, Draco was there, looking up with a bright smile from his Transfiguration homework.

“Hi, Harry! What—“ His voice cut off as he took in their expressions—or perhaps his empathy was allowing him to feel some of their emotions. He sat up, his own expression racing steadily towards anger. “What happened?”

Harry shot a glance at Blaise. Blaise shrugged. If Harry could cast the healing spell without dropping the glamour, the gesture seemed to say, then he wouldn’t repeat anything.

But Harry knew he’d have to at least see the cuts in the mirror to do this. He only remembered that there was a healing spell, not the incantation, and the Blood Whip Curse was nothing to fool around with. Besides, Draco would probably find out that he’d lied later and be angry as hell. Harry sighed and dropped the glamour, wincing a bit as the pain seemed to increase with the revelation of the cuts.

Draco leaped off the bed and circled around behind him, obviously working out that the damage had to be there since Harry looked fine from the front. Blaise walked over to his own bed and shut the curtains, giving them what privacy he could. Harry appreciated it. He could hardly look at Draco’s face as he let his hand ghost just above Harry’s wounds. He didn’t want to share this.

“Well, at least it isn’t a promise of fiery vengeance. Harry could live with that. “The Blood Whip,” he murmured. “One of those nasty curses that makes most shields explode when it touches them. I don’t know for sure if it was aimed at me—it might have been aimed at someone I was walking with—but—”

“Whoever cast it probably knew that you would get in the way.” Draco turned Harry towards his trunk, the direction he’d been walking when he dropped the glamour. “You remember a healing spell for it?”

“In the fourth year Defense Against the Dark Arts book,” said Harry quietly, still distrusting Draco’s gentleness. “That’s what I was going to get.”

“You can get it, then.” Draco’s hand trailed through his hair, snagging here and there. The gesture was almost absent, and yet so possessive that Harry gave an uncomfortable wriggle. Draco didn’t appear to notice. “I want you healed as soon as possible.”

Harry fetched the book, removed his shirt, and then went into the loo. With the help of the mirror, he focused on the image of the two whip-cuts, crossed like an X along his back from the top of his shoulders to his waist. Staring intently at the image, he whispered, “Integro et commoveo inresectus.”

The lines of blood narrowed, then unpeeled, as though an invisible whip were taking them away in turn, moving from his waist up to his shoulders and leaving unmarked skin behind. Harry relaxed only long enough for Draco to step up in front of him. Harry watched his expression in the mirror, head still twisted to look over his shoulder, as Draco ran a hand down Harry’s chest.

“Harry,” Draco said, voice slow and soft, crooning and insistent. “Tell me who did this to you, Harry.”

Harry swallowed. He wasn’t frightened of Draco, of course he wasn’t, but there was that stare again—constructed by the lines of his cheeks and his jaw as much as his eyes—that promised intolerable pain for whoever had hurt Harry. It was the same way he had looked when Margaret cursed Argutus. Harry winced at the thought of what he might do to Marietta. “I’m not going to tell you that, Draco,” he said carefully.

“No,” he whispered, his voice so soft that it lacked conviction.

Draco kissed his other temple. The only sound in the room was their breathing, Harry’s faster and louder than Draco’s. He waited.
It’s probably harder to resist because he’s touching me, Harry thought, the sudden realization cutting through his mental haze like a sunbeam through fog. I didn’t know I was that susceptible, or that I wanted so much to share everything with him.

Maybe he still could. It seemed like a good idea to his clouded brain, at least. “I’ll tell you,” Harry whispered. “I’ll tell you, if…”

“If?” Draco’s hand was moving again, skating and hovering above his cheek. It pressed itself to Harry’s back next, rubbing in circles, and let Harry remember he was half-naked.

“You promise not to hurt the person who did this.” He’d come awfully close to saying “her,” Harry reflected, and he didn’t want to eliminate half the school from Draco’s guessing game. He blamed the hand on his back. It felt good, but not good enough to trigger his panic.

“I can’t do that, Harry.” Draco’s voice was still sweet, without a trace of anger, and that just made him frighten Harry more. “You know I can’t. Tell me the name.” A sharp kiss to his cheek, with a hint of teeth behind it.

Slowly, successfully, Harry fought himself out of that embrace, and moved towards the door. The mist in his head was finally dissipating. He turned to face Draco, and shook his head.

“Not unless you promise.”

Draco cocked his head to the side, and a faint, amused smile curved his mouth. “Harry,” he said gently. “You’ve misunderstood something fundamental about me. You still have the impression that, at bottom, I care as much for the rest of the school as you do. I don’t. Your life is more important to me than that of some random Ravenclaw. You’re mine. I am going to find out that name. I won’t push you now, but I will find it out, and I will punish her.”

Harry had the feeling his eyes flickered, but he did his best to maintain the neutral mask. “Who said it’s a female Ravenclaw?”

“Because it usually is, lately.” Draco moved past him, still smiling. “Rest now. You’ve been wounded. You need to sleep, and I need to make sure she’ll regret ever being born.”

Harry folded his arms and shut his eyes. The odd atmosphere still lingered around him, made him want nothing so much as to go to Draco and tell.

And is your emotional comfort worth Marietta’s life?

Harry swallowed and shook his head. He was tired after the argument at the dueling club and the pain from the curse and trying to prevent Ron from attacking Marietta and the healing spell. He could rest. He could do that.

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Harry heard the first murmurs of excited conversation the next morning before he ever arrived at the Great Hall. Two of the Slytherin prefects were walking in front of him and Draco as they went to breakfast, and Harry tensed in spite of himself when he heard “Ravenclaw.”

“—a foot-long tongue, and her skin turned purple with pink spots! Madam Pomfrey couldn’t figure out how to remove them!”

“Is it true her arm was Transfigured into a chicken wing?” The female prefect’s eyes were bright with enjoyment as she listened, and the male prefect, the one who, it seemed, had actually been in the hospital wing and seen the victim, was happy to oblige her with more details.

“Oh, yeah. And her left foot was a chicken’s talon, original size and everything, so she can’t walk. She’s delusional and blind, and her hair’s grown down the sides of her head and into her skin. I think there might even be more things wrong that I didn’t get to see.” The male prefect’s voice rang wistfully. “But the best thing is that all the spells are interwoven together. To take one off, Madam Pomfrey will have to take them all off, and she can’t figure some of them out!”

The female prefect snickered appreciatively. “What’s her name?”

“Marietta Edgecombe.” The boy shook his head. “I don’t know what she did to annoy the Weasley twins, but I sure hope I never do it.”

Harry felt his shoulders stiffen. Ron. Ron told the twins to get vengeance on Marietta, and they did. It sounded as though they’d
launched several hexes or tricks or jokes in her direction all at once, but the interwoven nature of the spells suggested it was more complex and malicious than that.

The worst thing was that Harry couldn’t confront Ron about it. He would be the one to expose the House feud if he did. The prefects weren’t speaking as if these were the actions of a pair of Gryffindors against a Ravenclaw; these were the actions of the Weasley twins against someone who irritated them. Fred and George pranked everyone who would sit still long enough. No one was going to think that Marietta was a special case, that this was revenge for a spell she’d cast at someone else.

Very good, Ron, Harry thought grudgingly. You’re hot-tempered as all hell, but you’re a good strategist. Of course, Ron was a master chess player. Harry shouldn’t have let himself forget that in the face of Ron’s shouting.

Draco caught his arm. Harry looked sideways, and saw his eyes shining like blades in the sun.

“She’s the one who will regret being born, then,” said Draco, with a nod. “I see.”

“Don’t, Draco,” Harry hissed under his breath as they entered the Great Hall. “The twins got her. Hasn’t she been punished enough?”

“No nearly enough,” Draco breathed. “Oh, Harry, the things I am going to curse her with.”

“I don’t want you to,” said Harry, deciding that direct appeal was probably the most likely tactic to work right now. If Draco cared about what he wanted, then he should—

Draco just shook his head, and escorted Harry in to breakfast with a hand on his back. Harry made a few more attempts to dissuade him from whatever vengeance was floating around his brain, including arguments about the damage from the Blood Whip being easily reversed and war in the school happening if he took revenge. Draco hummed to himself and ignored him.

Harry hissed in frustration as he sat down at the far edge of the Slytherin table and started to eat. Why does he act all compliant when I do want him to assert himself, and then turn stubborn over things like this?

The post owls came skimming in through the windows, bearing the *Daily Prophet*. Harry already knew there would be a story about the abuse charges, or about the trial, or about “ordinary citizens” voicing “concern over the loss of Albus Dumbledore” and “false charges,” if the writer was Argus Veritaserum. He made up his mind to concentrate on his food and ignore them.

Draco’s humming stopped. Harry felt the tension inside him crank up another notch, but he kept on eating.

“Harry,” said Draco, and his voice lacked that terrible gentleness. This was actual sympathy. He held the newspaper towards Harry. “I’m sorry, but you have to see this. It’s better now than it will be later.”

Harry swallowed and took the paper, staring blankly. At first, his eyes were drawn to the photograph, and he didn’t quite understand what he was seeing. It looked like Auror Mallory, a triumphant smile on her face, walking between two considerably sterner Aurors down a corridor lined with cells. Harry almost didn’t recognize her. What in the world could have happened to make her smile like that?

Then he saw the headline.

**HEAD AUROR ARRESTED FOR CURSING POTTER PARENTS**

‘They deserved it’ Mallory said

*By: Rita Skeeter*

Harry couldn’t bring himself to read the story. He handed the paper back to Draco instead and shoved his chair away from the table.

“Wait a second, Harry,” said Millicent, scrambling up and grabbing his right arm. Draco’s hand closed around the stump of his left wrist a moment later, in that delicate gesture he used to command Harry’s attention. “We’re not done yet, and I think someone
should go with you.”

“I’m fine,” Harry whispered. He tried and failed not to think of his parents writhing under the kind of battle curses a trained Auror would know. He tried and failed not to think of the rage Mallory had shown when she came to the school that summer to arrest Lily and Dumbledore. She could do wandless magic. She was nearly as strong as Snape. She would have made them suffer.

He felt his breakfast rushing back up his throat, and tore his arm and his wrist free from Draco’s and Millicent’s hands. As he ran towards the door of the Great Hall, he caught a glimpse of Connor’s face, frozen in horror, and his heart pounded, hard, in guilt. If he had contacted Scrimgeour and asked him to make sure that Mallory wasn’t let anywhere near their parents, then perhaps this wouldn’t have happened.

“Intestinus erumpo!”

Harry knew he should have been able to block it. He knew he should have had a shield up. Perhaps if the person who cast the spell had been farther away from him at the time, and if pity and guilt and terror hadn’t eaten his concentration, he still could have managed it.

As it was, the Entrail-Expelling Curse hit him in the back a second after it was cast. Harry cried out as he felt his belly slit open and his intestines fly out of them, tangling around his feet. The pain was unearthly, unable to stand comparisons to anything else he’d felt because he’d never felt anything like this before. He dropped to his knees, gasping, knowing even through the haze of agony that he shouldn’t move. That was how many wizards reacted to the Entrail-Expelling Curse, and they wound up tangling themselves in their own guts and doing more damage.

Draco was by his side a second later, hands shaking and eyes wide. Harry leaned against him, gasping, closing his eyes as the spell pushed one more tangle of pink and white out of him. He could smell blood and shit and fouler things. He concentrated, pulling on his magic, forcing himself to think of this as a battlefield. The sheer horror of what had happened to him kept trying to push his mind away from the healing spell that might help.

“Finite Incantatem,” he said first, just to make sure that he removed the last of the curse. Otherwise, it might be struggling to push his guts out of him even as he repaired his stomach. Shock was quickly descending on him, but Harry fell back into his training, in which such things as shock didn’t exist, and there was only what had to be done. “Conglacio.” That stilled the movement of his intestines. “Abdo intestinus.”

The guts coiled back up inside him, a process that made Harry jerk in Draco’s arms and draw several gasping breaths. Merlin, this hurt. But that was no reason to faint. Harry repeated the spell several times, focusing his mind on a picture of what his body would look like, healthy and normal. He knew the damage many curses caused. He just had to reverse his mental picture of the Entrail-Expelling one, and it should be perfectly reversed, everything back in its proper place.

Larger hands steadied him as the last of the pink and white coils settled into place, and then a low voice snarled an incantation that would at least staunch his blood flow and hold the wound in his stomach motionless. Harry blinked up at Snape, his eyes fluttering in time with his breaths now.

“Sleep, Harry,” said Snape. His eyes were incandescent with rage, the brightest Harry had ever seen them. “Consopio.”

In spite of his curiosity, in spite of his longing to tell them to go easy on the person who had done this, Harry closed his eyes and went to sleep.

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Minerva was familiar with Severus Snape’s bad moods. She had seen plenty of them—the temper he was usually in when he came out of one of his little chats with Dumbledore, the cold sarcastic anger in which he sometimes dragged one of her particularly mischief-making Gryffindors in front of her (it was usually a Weasley twin), the sneering contempt he used when he thought he knew something she didn’t or that had flown above her head.

Until now, though, when his rage burned hot and he actually screamed at her in her office, she realized she had never seen him truly infuriated.

“Someone attacked him in the middle of the Great Hall, Minerva! The Entrail-Expelling Curse! And just because none of Flitwick’s little bastards will give up their comrade does not mean that I intend to see this go unpunished!” Severus leaned forward across her desk and glared at her. “I will use Veritaserum and Legilimency with or without your permission. I will find the person who did this.”
Minerva maintained the calm mask while she rapidly considered her options. On the one hand, she could hardly do as Severus asked without protests from parents that their little darlings had been forced to take a truth serum or have their minds ransacked. What Severus wanted was between dubious and outright illegal, unless the students actually volunteered.

On the other hand, she knew as well as Severus that if they let this go unpunished, then Harry would never be safe. Madam Pomfrey couldn’t be on guard in the hospital wing twenty-four hours a day, and neither could young Mr. Malfoy—though from what Minerva now knew of the boy, she had no doubt that he would try. Someone would enter sooner or later and try to cast another illegal curse, or even a lethal one. Harry might be sleeping. He might not know the counter. Several people might attack at once, overcoming him because of his ethics and reluctance to hurt others.

Something had to be done.

A knock on the door interrupted her before she could tell Severus what she thought their best option was. Minerva sighed and sat up. The only people who knew the password for the gargoyle were other professors and prefects. Almost certainly, one of them would bring more bad news. “Come in,” she said steadily.

The student who entered was not a prefect, but a fourth-year Ravenclaw. Minerva stared at her in wonder. It was a moment before she could recall her name, but one didn’t forget those large glasses and protruding silver eyes easily.

“Miss Lovegood,” she said at last, trying to control her tone. “What are you doing here?”

Luna Lovegood nodded seriously at her. “Headmistress,” she said. “I asked the chairs at the Ravenclaw table about who Harry’s attacker was. And I have a name now. It was Gilbert Rovenan.”

Minerva could see still and terrible anger gathering in Severus’s face. He would shout, at any second, that they didn’t have time for Luna’s nonsense right now, that she was wasting valuable moments when they could have gone hunting for the real suspect, that she must indeed be quite mad to come to the Headmistress’s office.

But Minerva was thinking. She knew that Luna should not have been able to enter the moving staircase at all. And she was remembering a girl she had known when she was a Hogwarts student, one who seemed distracted half the time because of objects chattering constantly at her.

“Miss Lovegood,” she said. “How did you get up here?”

Luna Lovegood gave her a patient look. “The gargoyle told me, Headmistress,” she said. “I asked the chairs at the Ravenclaw table about who Harry’s attacker was. And I have a name now. It was Gilbert Rovenan.”

Minerva could see the still and terrible anger gathering in Severus’s face. He would shout, at any second, that they didn’t have time for Luna’s nonsense right now, that she was wasting valuable moments when they could have gone hunting for the real suspect, that she must indeed be quite mad to come to the Headmistress’s office.

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“Miss Lovegood,” she said. “How did you get up here?”

Luna Lovegood gave her a patient look. “The gargoyle told me, Headmistress,” she said. “It’s quite lonely, you know. I think you should talk to it more. I’m just me, but anyone could get up here if they just charmed it for a few moments and got it to give them the password,” she added in a tone of censure.

“Ridiculous,” Severus hissed.

“And yet, Severus, here she stands,” Minerva told him, and saw rationality take hold in his mind for the first time since Harry was hurt. His eyes narrowed, and he gave Luna a long look.

“You are a friend of my ward, Miss Lovegood?” he asked.

“Oh, yes.” Luna’s face brightened. “We went to the Yule Ball together last year.” Snape was nodding now, the right chord in his brain obviously pressed. “He was so kind,” Luna continued, “not stepping too heavily on the floor or crushing the benches when he sat down. The furniture all likes him. So the chairs were happy to tell me that it was Gilbert who cast the Entrail-Expelling Curse.”

“Why are you willing to tell us who did it, Miss Lovegood?” Minerva had to ask. The rest of the Ravenclaws, though some of them looked torn, had maintained that they didn’t know who cast the curse.

Luna’s face was solemn. “Because I know for certain, and I’m not Gilbert’s friend,” she said. “I’m Harry’s. He’s been very strange—Harry, I mean. The walls have tried to talk to him, but he can’t hear them. So they’ve been talking to me instead. I know people have been casting curses at him, but Harry always wills other people to leave them alone so strongly that he blocks the walls’ memories. This time, he wasn’t anywhere near the chairs, and they told me about Gilbert.”

Severus had started for the door at a glide, his eyes gleaming. “Severus,” Minerva said sharply. He paused and glanced at her over his shoulder. “Bring him here. Alive, and unharmed,” she added.
Severus studied her intently for a moment, then inclined his head in a sharp nod and left. Minerva hoped her caution would actually work, and that Severus would not pause along the way to “let drop” to his Slytherins who had done this.

“Miss Lovegood, do you know why Mr. Rovenan cast that curse?” she asked her.

Luna sat down carefully, patting the back of the chair she sat in as if stroking a cat. “Because Marietta Edgecombe is his girlfriend,” she said simply. “She wound up in the hospital wing this morning, and Gilbert blames Harry for it.” She shrugged. “I tried to ask the walls if that was fair, but Harry blocked their memory again.”

Minerva decided that she might as well give in to her curiosity, as Severus was most likely bringing their culprit. “This is a remarkable gift you have, Miss Lovegood.”

Luna looked at her in mild puzzlement. “Thank you, Headmistress, but really, everything talks. Everything is alive. But most people refuse to listen,” she concluded, with a little sigh.

Minerva continued talking to her for the few minutes it took Severus to arrive again. Luna continued to gently deflect her queries. So far as she was concerned, she lived in the actual, normal world, and everyone else was blind, deaf, and dumb. At least, Minerva thought, it would explain the quiet, dreamy girl’s inattention in class, if all the objects in sight were simultaneously trying to tell her stories.

Gilbert Rovenan was a burly sixth-year Ravenclaw whom Minerva remembered as an above-average Transfiguration student, though for some reason he hadn’t received enough OWL levels to continue into the NEWT class. He tugged away from Snape the moment they were through the office door, and straightened his sleeve. He had blue eyes and dark hair, and wasn’t bad-looking, though not much above ordinary in that department, either. He appealed to her without looking once at the silent, and tightly coiled, Head of Slytherin beside him.

“Headmistress, Professor Snape seized my arm and hauled me off,” he complained. “Is that fair? He wouldn’t even tell me what it was about.”

“We know that you cast the Entrail-Expelling Curse at Mr. Potter,” said Minerva, choosing to act as if they had certain knowledge from long years of handling Gryffindors who, while they would not lie, would keep silent unless they thought she already had evidence of their wrongdoing.

Gilbert flushed to the roots of his hair, and his face twisted with hatred that Minerva could only stare at. “He hurt my girlfriend,” he said, his voice low and murderous. “I knew the curse. I thought it was only fair that he pay for hurting her.”

Minerva closed her eyes. She knew Severus would wear a triumphant expression, and Luna a sorrowful one. Her decision was already made.

“Mr. Rovenan,” she said, “you will be expelled. Your wand will be broken. You—“

“But you can’t—I have to speak to Professor Flitwick! I want to talk to my parents!” Gilbert’s voice was becoming shrill.

And so, Minerva thought, it begins. She opened her eyes and entered the first skirmish in the war that was about to break out in Hogwarts. This was her battleground now, and while it was infinitely less satisfying to intimidate a sixteen-year-old boy than it was to battle a Dark wizard and Transfigure him into a lump of shapeless flesh, she was not one to shirk her duties.

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Harry came slowly back to himself. It felt as if he didn’t awaken, but rather washed in to shore on a wave. First he felt the water, and then the dry sand under his palms, and then the whole scene inverted and he was lying in a hospital bed with someone holding a cup of water to his lips.

Harry drank. The arm that had gently supported his shoulders tightened fast enough to make him grunt in pain, and Draco’s voice called, “Madam Pomfrey! He’s awake!”

Harry opened his eyes, and then blinked as Draco slipped his glasses onto his face. He turned his head to look at him.

“You could have died.” Draco’s face was pale, and his eyes had that blade-gleam, this time mingled with fear.
“But I didn’t.” Harry thought it was important to point that out. He wriggled and tried to sit up in the bed, but Madam Pomfrey came bustling out then and scolded him into lying still.

“Not so fast, Mr. Potter,” she said. “You’ve suffered a great deal of shock, you know, and then you disordered things further when you attempted to put your entrails back into your gut all by yourself.” She gave him a chiding look as she held her wand over his belly. “So that had to be straightened out. You’ve been asleep for a day. You’ll be staying here at least three more days for observation. That’s the minimum length of time it takes to recover from an Entrail-Expelling Curse.”

Harry subsided. When he looked around, he could see that Connor, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Blaise, Millicent, Zacharias, Luna, and Neville were there, and he flushed in embarrassment to find himself the focus of so many gazes. Madam Pomfrey went into action a moment later, herding all of them but Draco and Connor out, so that one obstacle was taken care of.

“Merlin, Harry,” Draco said then, and hugged him around the neck. “I thought you were dead.”

I came closer than I’d like to think, Harry thought. He swallowed a healing potion that Madam Pomfrey gave him, then asked, “What’s been happening?”

“They caught the one who cast the curse at you,” said Connor. His eyes were furiously alight, and he was twirling his wand between his fingers, ignoring Madam Pomfrey’s frowns and pointed looks at it. “His name’s Gilbert Rovenan. He’s going to be expelled. They’ve talked it over, Professor Flitwick and the Headmistress, and Professor Flitwick finally gave up pleading for him. He’s going.” He paused and stared over Harry’s bed at Draco. “But not until tomorrow.”

Harry glanced at Draco in alarm. He was just in time to see an expression that looked far too much like his brother’s on his boyfriend’s face.

“And what are you going to do?” Harry demanded. He tried to sit up again, but he was weak enough that Draco held him easily down with one arm.

“Who says that we’re going to do anything?” Connor said innocently. “We can’t get into Ravenclaw Tower, anyway.” He gave a winning smile at Madam Pomfrey, who simply moved away from the bed as if she had no interest in what they were saying. The moment she was gone, Connor leaned nearer and lowered his voice. “We’re going in tonight, Ron and Draco and I, with Fred and George and Ginny and Hermione. Luna’ll let us in, and Cho will join us once we get there.”

“But—“

“Connor, would you leave me alone with Harry, please?” Draco asked then, with unnatural politeness. Connor nodded the same way.

“Of course. I have to get to my dueling lesson with Professor Snape anyway.” He tipped a wink at Draco. Harry wished they would stop that. It was unnerving. “Nine’o’clock, then?”

“As we agreed,” Draco said, and Connor left.

Harry started in the moment his brother walked through the doors of the hospital wing. “You can’t hurt him. If he’s going to be expelled, then—“

“You’re wrong, Harry,” Draco said. “Things didn’t fall out the way you thought they would, not when Rovenan attacked you in front of the entire school. None of the professors could ignore what happened. There’s no war between Houses. Most of Ravenclaw is ashamed as hell about it, or, if they’re angry, they have the good sense to shut up. Even the Hufflepuffs are shunning them. Gryffindors and Slytherins are getting along better than we ever have planning revenge for you. Don’t you see, Harry?” he added. “It’s practically incumbent on you not to object to this, in the name of inter-House unity.”

“I don’t want him hurt—“

“You don’t get a choice.” Draco abruptly leaned in towards him, and Harry shrank back. Draco’s words were soft and fierce. “Not this time. Your safety and your well-being matters to more people than just you, Harry, and even to more people than just other Slytherins. You’re not a saint, that we should just forgive whatever happens to you. We’ve been pushed too far, and this is the end.”

Harry shut his eyes. “Nothing I can say is going to stop it?”
“Nothing,” Draco confirmed. “Even if you tell one of the professors, we can get past them, since we have Ravenclaws on the inside we didn’t tell you about. And you’re too weak to get out of bed and go stand guard at the Tower, so unless you’re actually going to compel us to stop, there’s nothing you can do to prevent us. Are you going to compel us, Harry?” His chin inched up.

Harry stared at him, and saw not just the Slytherin determined to take vengeance, nor the Malfoy protecting what belonged to him, but also the boy who had nearly seen his boyfriend die in front of him. Harry remembered the surge of protective rage he’d felt when Greyback went after Draco.

He swallowed and closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“Good,” said Draco softly, and kissed Harry, and then left.

Harry stared at the ceiling, absently rubbing his stomach, and wondered why the hell these things seemed to happen to him so often.

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Chapter Thirty-Four: Ravenclaw Tower

Snape stepped back and lowered his wand, blinking slowly. His ears rang from the explosions of smoke and light, and though none of the spells that Potter had hurled had touched him, the effort behind them was much improved.

“I am tempted to award points to Gryffindor,” he murmured.

Potter inclined his head as he put his wand away. He didn’t look tired, the way that most young wizards would have after casting that many spells in quick succession. He looked as though flames had taken root in him, hollowed him out, and spread to shine through his eyes. Snape studied him narrowly, and then nodded. He would not have thought it, but then, he had been letting the shadow of James—and of Harry, who was at home in both Dark and Light—blind him. This Potter was more closely akin in his magic to what a Weasley might be able to do. He could hurl much stronger Light spells than he would ever manage Dark Arts. His use of spells based on fire and light was nearly instinctive.

And rage, in this case rage fueled by protectiveness for his brother, enhanced his magic. But it had to be true and righteous anger, not the irritation that he had shown so far in his dueling lessons with Snape.

“But you won’t award points, Professor?”

Potter’s sly voice brought him back from his contemplation. Snape shook his head. “No, I won’t,” he said. “I will the day that you manage to knock me out with a spell.” He grimaced immediately after having made the promise—he never awarded points to the Lion House if he could help it—but what was said was said. And Potter’s smile was not as smug as he would have expected, merely confident.

“That’s to be expected, Professor,” he murmured. “Now, if you excuse me, I need to meet someone at nine.” And he opened the door and hastened out of the office before Snape could even dismiss him.

Snape thought about taking points for impertinence. Then he thought about the flames behind Potter’s hazel eyes—the same flames that he had once seen in the eyes of James Potter across the one battlefield where Snape had ever respected him—and refrained.

He moved slowly over to the simmering cauldron, and resumed brewing his potion. It would look like the Draught of Peace to anyone who came in and looked at it. He could account for all the ingredients to Minerva, and even for his reasons for brewing it. Of course he would want to show the students what a perfect example looked like, since it was an OWL-standard Potion and none of them had yet managed to brew it correctly.

No one but another Potions Master—and few of them, Snape was certain—would have noticed that there was the slightest green tinge to the Draught, a deep and living green like that on the Slytherin crests.

Snape worked swiftly, his fingers shredding and cutting and crushing and stirring without much thought. He would much rather remember the way Harry had looked after the Entrail-Expelling Curse had hit him than concentrate on a potion he had been able to brew since he was seven, or even the variation that he had perfected when he was sixteen.

He wanted to etch the memory of Harry’s white and gasping face into his brain. He wanted to savor the realization that had hit
him, a former Death Eater who had seen that curse performed numerous times, that this time was different from all the others, and that something in him would have died if he had lost Harry.

That mattered more than all the vengeance he might take, even more than the vengeance he suspected Connor Potter and some other students were on their way to take. It mattered that Harry was alive and healing and had the chance to change. His parents in prison, people paying for what had been done to him, Dumbledore executed or stripped of his magic—what were they but details?

For the first time in his life, Severus Snape could acknowledge that vengeance might not be the best course. He could look back on the potions he had brewed for James Potter and Minister Fudge last year not with regret that he had got caught, but with regret that he had ever brewed them all, because in brewing them he had hurt Harry.

The words were simple in his mind. He could not figure out why they were such an enormous revelation.

Then he looked down at the green-shimmering potion in the cauldron, and he knew.

Though he would certainly finish this potion, he might not use it. In fact, he might Vanish it the moment it was correctly brewed. The thought of hurting Rovenan paled beside the thought of hurting Harry.

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Draco nodded as Connor came up, completing their group. The other Gryffindors had met him at the base of the final staircase up to Ravenclaw Tower considerably earlier, since they had no dueling lesson with Snape to hinder them.

Granger had a dark frown on her face, and she was tapping her wand against her leg. That was considerably scarier than the two youngest Weasleys, who were either eyeing Draco suspiciously or eyeing the steps in anticipation, but not as scary as the Weasley twins. For the first time Draco had been around them since he’d arrived at Hogwarts, they weren’t laughing, nor even smiling. Oh, sometimes they smirked, as when their hands went down and patted their robe pockets. But they weren’t laughing, and Draco suspected he was about to see what Fred and George Weasley could be like when they were actually going into battle, not just pranking someone for the fun of it.

“Let’s go,” Draco whispered. They followed him up the stairs, though he heard Weasley—Ron—muttering about how come Malfoy got to take the lead. His sister shut him up with a few choice words that made Draco hide a chuckle. He wouldn’t have thought any Weasley knew those words, never mind the youngest.

No one met them on the stairs. Draco did stop them halfway up to cast Disillusionment Charms on them all. If Ravenclaw Tower was set up at all like Slytherin or Gryffindor, then the sixth-year boys’ room might be a considerable distance from the door. All they really knew was that Rovenan had received permission to spend one last night among his cronies, in his own room, before his ceremonious expulsion and the snapping of his wand tomorrow morning. Chang was going to be their guide once they entered the Tower.

Draco curled his lip, then shook his head. He shouldn’t feel so irritated at the thought of Chang, really. She was joining them because of the life-debt she owed Harry; this couldn’t make up for it, but taking revenge on someone who had hurt her ally would be a duty for a Light pureblood witch. And Harry had proven conclusively two days ago, as far as Draco was concerned, that he belonged to Draco now.

Smirking at the thought of that, he nearly missed Loony Lovegood’s slight movement. She stepped out from behind the tapestry that overhung the front door of the Tower and startled them all. Draco controlled himself and narrowed his eyes, though they narrowed even further when she looked straight at them as if their Disillusionment Charms weren’t there.

“Oh, hello,” she said. “You might have wanted to choose stronger spells, though. I can see you.”

“Yes, but no one else can, Luna,” said Granger. Her voice rasped. Draco wondered if she was just impatient, or if Loony grated on her as much as she did on him. Of course, Granger was all about logic and clear ends, so maybe she would dislike anyone as mad as Loony.

And why the hell am I wondering about what the Mudblood, of all people, thinks? Draco shook his head. I’ll be as bad as Harry next, insisting on “understanding” people all over the place. I should be thinking about revenge on Rovenan.

As it happened, though, he had the perfect curse, so he didn’t need to think about it that much. Loony had already whispered the password to the Tower door, and it swung wide. They followed after her, while Loony hovered to the side and looked around
vaguely. That was another reason having her let them in was a stroke of genius, and Draco had to admit he commended the Weasel—Ron—for having thought of it. No one would think it strange that Loony Lovegood was keeping the door open for a long time, or just standing there and staring into space.

The Ravenclaw common room was considerably warmer than the dungeons, of course, partially because of its location but also because of the many fires flaring along the walls; Draco didn’t think he’d ever been in a room with so many hearths in his life. Blue and bronze was everywhere, and smooth, dark furniture dominated the view, if one didn’t count the enormous mural of a soaring eagle on the far wall. Staircases sprouted at the other end of the long, narrow room, and even as Chang popped out of a chair near the largest fire and strolled casually towards them, Draco’s gaze locked on them.

“This way,” Chang murmured, pausing just in front of them. Draco stared at her suspiciously, but then realized there was a faint, rhinestone-colored glow around her eyes. She had on a spell that let her see through glamours and charms, then. It was comforting to realize that, and also to see that almost all the other Ravenclaws remained bent over their books or engaged in agitated, whispered conversations as they passed towards the staircases.

Draco studied the expressions on their faces, and sneered. Most of them seemed embarrassed or ashamed or fearful. Well, they should be. Ravenclaw was currently lowest in the number of House points, extremely unlikely to win the Cup, and Slytherin was preparing to declare a silent war on them. Even the seventh-years whom Draco knew had listened most sympathetically to talk of pureblood purity, and therefore might join the Death Eaters, were outraged that a half-blood had dared to attack someone powerful enough to be a Lord, and that he would only be expelled and have his wand broken in retaliation for that. The argument that the Headmistress couldn’t do more than that because Rovenan wasn’t of age had been ignored, as it should be, Draco thought. Any proper Slytherin knew there were ways of doing things outside the boundaries of the law.

He had already written to his father, asking him to pursue a few of those ways. If Lucius took Draco’s suggestions, the Rovenan family was about to find itself a good deal poorer. They owed debts, it seemed, or at least his pureblood father did. Lucius only had to buy up a few of those debts, or procure them by favors granted, and then call them in all at once.

Draco rather thought his father would do it. Harry was theirs—the boy Draco loved, the leader they had sworn to follow, his father’s truce-dance ally, his mother’s all but adopted son. Lucius would probably come up with even more creative punishments, which Draco was all for.

They reached the foot of a certain staircase, and Chang tipped her head at them. “Be quiet,” she murmured. “They’re having a farewell party for him right now, but there’re only a few people up there. They’ll hear us coming unless we’re careful.”

Draco nodded, and made shushing gestures at the others, though he wondered how effective they would be, considering the Disillusionment Charms. He followed Chang as quietly as he could, and the Weasley twins did a creditable impression of sneakiness, too. It was not Draco’s fault that Granger and Connor and the two younger Weasleys sounded like elephants.

They reached a door marked Ravenclaw Sixth-Year Boys. Draco rolled his eyes. He supposed Ravenclaws liked everything precise, but there was no need for that kind of nonsense in Slytherin. Everyone knew where the rooms were, and who they belonged to, and who should be in them at any given time of the day.

The room was indeed silent. Chang gave them one more warning glance, and then laid her hand on the door.

She froze. Draco wondered if she’d heard something suspicious. He gripped his wand tightly, waiting for her signal to move ahead.

Then Chang withdrew her hand from the wood, and Draco saw that she was shaking. A moment later, she slumped motionless to the floor. Draco stared down at her in shock. The door had some kind of ward on it. But who would do that, when they’re living in common and—

The door to the room burst open, and many, many more Ravenclaws than Draco had expected to be facing rushed out. He could make out Parsons in the back of them, and Turtledove, Parsons’s particular friend, and Corner, and Terry Boot, and a few others he knew.

At the head of them all was Rovenan, and his eyes shone with a mixture of desperation and fury.

“Finite Incantatem!” he bellowed, gesturing straight at them with his wand.

Draco felt the warmth of the Disillusionment Charms vanishing, and then Rovenan was on him, and he didn’t have much time or chance to think about anything else.
He cast up a *Protego*, using the instincts that Harry had drilled into him in the dueling club, and so Rovenan’s first hex bounced and went straight back at him. He rolled out of the way with what Draco thought were disturbingly battle-trained reflexes, and the hex took down one of the girls behind him. That still left too many for Draco’s taste, especially since he was on a narrow landing with his allies ranged behind him and below him on the stairs, but at least he had a moment to breathe and think, and settle on the curse that he would like to use next.

*It has to be a battle curse, not a vengeance curse. And no Dark Arts unless absolutely necessary.*

Rovenan was already spitting out the first syllables of what sounded like a Dismemberment Curse—and where the *hell* had he learned so much about Dark Arts?—but Draco was faster than that. The Dismemberment Curse had at least eight syllables. He only had to speak four.

“*Rictusempra!*”

Rovenan began to laugh, and his wand trembled in his hand. Draco watched for a moment, and decided that he was not going to drop it. He didn’t allow himself more than a moment to make that decision, remembering the lesson that Harry had tried to drill into him, and Professor Snape, and their battle on the night of the full moon: *The wizard left alive on the battlefield is often the quickest.*

“*Expelliarmus!*”

The wand soared from Rovenan’s hand to Draco’s. Rovenan’s eyes flashed, but he didn’t look a bit fearful, even as Draco stuck the wand in a pocket and clapped his left hand over it. Instead, he turned halfway around, crouching, and began yanking at his robe.

A pair of bright yellow pebbles soared over Draco’s head and smacked down in the middle of the landing. One of the twins yelled, “Cover your nose!”

Draco had time to heed the warning. The several Ravenclaws on the landing, who were packed together and probably hadn’t seen exactly who they were facing yet, didn’t.

Plumes of yellow smoke burst into being from the pebbles. They didn’t drift and dissipate like smoke, though, but maintained a solid fountain shape, like water, heading straight for the Ravenclaws. A few of them took it right in the nose, and began to moan. Draco watched as red blotches broke out over their faces and their eyes swelled shut, and chuckled in spite of himself. It looked as though the twins had given them a nasty allergic reaction to something.

He felt a shove at his side, and then the Weasley sister was on the landing with him, just as Parsons aimed her wand. Parsons said something that sounded nasty and twisting, not a spell Draco was familiar with, and a dark line sprang from her wand and head towards Ginny.

Ginny blocked it with *Haurio*, another shield spell Harry had been drilling into the dueling club, and then cast the Bat-Bogey Hex. Parsons clapped her hand over her nose, yelping indignant.

Draco tried to press forward, to get to Rovenan and stop whatever he was doing, but the landing was too small and too filled with too many people. The Ravenclaws who’d succumbed to the twins’ pebbles had fallen, and the others in the room were pushing their way out now. With a grimace, Draco knew they’d have to retreat down the stairs and hope they didn’t caught on the carpet or tripped up—or worse, met by Ravenclaws from below. Draco had the impression that most of those in the common room had been caught by surprise, but surely that couldn’t last.

He tapped Ginny on the shoulder and began to move backward, keeping up his *Protego* to get rid of the hexes and jinxes and curses coming his way. He strove to keep his head clear and his breathing even. Now was not the time for the kind of amateur heroics that Gryffindors favored. Just be steady, and they would all reach the bottom and be able to fight their way out of here.

Abruptly, all the magic around them turned foul. Draco gasped and began to cough. He felt weak in the knees. He bent over, closing his eyes, despite the fact that he wanted to stay upright and keep his hold on his wand. He’d never felt *evil* before, he thought, but he was feeling it now.

He remembered what it had been like on the battlefield when the bitch werewolf had tried to kill Harry. It had hurt to possess her and cast the Killing Curse on her, but he’d managed to do it, because he knew he had to. Harry was right. *Push through this, and do what needs to be done.*
He stood, and was glad to see that the female Weasley had retreated down to the step behind him, and that the rest of the Ravenclaws were coughing and gagging just like he was. A few of them had fainted. One or two were staring at Rovenan with looks of horror on their faces. Rovenan was coming forward, his face flushed, but he was seemingly otherwise unaffected by the magic. *Maybe he’s the source of it,* Draco thought, though he didn’t understand how that could be, unless he was capable of wandless magic.

He understood everything when he saw the bared and gleaming Dark Mark on Rovenan’s forearm.

*Harry said something like this happened once, that one of the Death Eaters he fought on the beach last summer turned all the magic foul. It's a last-ditch trick, apparently, but one that can be effective.*

It was no longer working on Draco, though. He was stone-cold sober, and he knew what Rovenan was trying to do. He really *had* been trying to kill Harry, and playing on his House’s general pigheadedness to hide his intent. And it had been awfully strange, hadn’t it, Draco thought, his mind clattering along like the Hogwarts Express, that so many Ravenclaws were casting high-level Dark Arts spells like the Blood Whip and the Entrail-Expelling Curse?

Rovenan locked eyes with him, and his smile suddenly faltered, as though he realized Draco was neither choking nor flinching from him in panic. He thrust his Marked arm forward. Draco choked once, but he gripped his wand and prepared to use a Dark Arts spell. He could, now. A Death Eater was fair game.

“Draco! *Do not.*”

Draco didn’t move—he wasn’t that foolish, to take his eyes off his enemy—but he felt every hair on his neck rise and tingle. Professor Snape was here.

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Snape felt it the moment the Dark Mark went into action, befouling all magic in the immediate area.

He felt it even though he was in the dungeons and he knew the befouling was happening several floors above. Hogwarts was pure of such evil influences, since Snape would never have used his own Mark in such a way. That made the sudden presence of this particular vicious trick as noticeable as a fire in the midst of a closed room. He rose, and he turned his head, and he let the sucking presence lead him.

Once he was out of the dungeons, he knew it was coming from Ravenclaw Tower. He altered his direction, then. As a teacher, he knew several little-used passages that ran towards the Tower, and they would cut down on the length of time that he had to spend running, since this *bloody* school wouldn’t let him Apparate.

He reached the tapestry, and realized he had no idea what the password was. He didn’t care. He lifted his wand, and his magic coiled in him and whirled around, and his *Reducto* smashed the door, and the tapestry with it, to bits.

That particular spell was safe. It was used by wizards of the Light as well as the Dark, and for all that his own Mark was burning on his arm now, it wouldn’t poison him—yet. Any use of Dark Arts in the befouled area would. Light spells were safe for at least the next half hour.

He tore through the common room, murmuring spells that repelled the bodies trying to run at him, the screaming students who didn’t have an idea what was going on and probably never would. Snape felt a surge of contempt even through the worry he was feeling right now. How could students reach their seventh year in Hogwarts and yet still be so innocent? They should train them better. Were it not for the curse on the position, he *would* ask Minerva to let him teach Defense.

And then he saw the knot of struggling bodies on the staircase, and knew his destination. He also saw the moment that Draco Malfoy straightened, fighting back against the overwhelming influence of the twisted magic, and knew that he was about to use Dark Arts, because that was what he would naturally turn to, with the training that Lucius had given him during his childhood and the way he knew war.

“Draco! *Do not.*”

Snape assumed Draco had heard him, since he didn’t collapse and shrivel into a withered husk in the next moment. Snape cast *Wingardium Leviosa* on himself, so that he could rise to his Slytherin’s level in a very short time. He wasn’t about to bother with the stairs, given that it was crowded with Weasleys.
He knew only three ways to stop the poison the Dark Mark was spreading. One was for the Death Eater who had invoked it to end it willingly. Snape doubted this one would do so, since he'd kept it burning for so long already. Another was for the Death Eater involved to Apparate or Portkey out—impossible, because of the wards on Hogwarts and this room in particular, though Snape supposed the fool might make it to one of the common room’s many fireplaces and Floo.

The third was for the Death Eater involved to die by a Light spell. Snape feared that course was the one he would have to take. He would see who the Death Eater was first.

He lifted his head, and was surprised and not surprised to see Gilbert Rovenan standing with his left forearm bared in front of Draco. The boy hadn’t seemed any more likely to be a Death Eater than anyone else, but Snape had barely known him, and he would have had an excellent hiding place, in the pit of chaos that Ravenclaw House had become of late.

Rovenan smirked at Snape, as if asking what the professor intended to do to him. Snape leveled his wand, holding the boy’s eyes all the while. He saw excitement in them, and vindictive glee, and no awareness of what he had done. Snape could understand that. He’d once felt much the same way, the first time he attacked a Muggleborn home as a Death Eater and saw the inhabitants cowering in front of him, someone paying him respect at last.

There were all sorts of routes by which Voldemort might have snared this boy. Perhaps he had been promised power and glory. Perhaps a family member had recruited him. Perhaps Karkaroff or Mulciber, during the time they’d taught Defense Against the Dark Arts last year, the most laughably named class in the whole of Hogwarts, had talked him into it.

Snape would never know, unless both of them managed to survive this confrontation, and he did not think they would. As he knew the emotions in the boy’s eyes, he knew what the likely outcomes would be. And when it had been him in Rovenan’s place, the earth could have shaken and he would not have yielded his loyalty to Voldemort, so convinced was he of his own rightness.

Snape felt something in him shift and click forward, a mixture of sorrow and utter determination that settled easily into place even though he had never felt it before. He had once been a loyal, joyous Death Eater, and then, after Regulus, he had gone cold to survive. There had never been this feeling, the regret mingled with the knowledge that he was ready to kill.

“Gilbert,” he said, using the boy’s first name in an effort to connect with him, his empathy for him in that moment outrunning even the remembrance that he was Harry’s attacker. “Will you stop it from burning before it turns every spell in the school deadly?”

Rovenan curled his lip and laughed. Does he know, Snape wondered, can he know, that the spell is killing him even as it works? There was a reason that Death Eaters used this magic so little and only at great need, and usually ended it as soon as possible. “No.”

And Snape would not let him leave here, not alive, not when he would join the ranks of their enemies and create more trouble.

The determination pushed forward and into all the corners of his mind, crushing out any other thoughts. Snape lifted his wand.

“Reducto.”

He spoke it softly, but with all his magic behind it, concentrating on Rovenan’s body as a barrier, an obstacle.

Rovenan soared. He soared across the landing and hit the wall of the tiny space—not far, but with considerable force. He hit the wall with an impact nothing could have survived, a crack that Snape knew would have ground some of his bones to powder. More to the point, it snapped his neck.

And the befouling stopped.

Snape knew how loud silence could be, but he hadn’t heard this particular silence in a while, the shocked and hurting silence of children who had just witnessed death for the first time. He turned, his mind spinning along the course that it would need to take now, and wondered if this was the way that Harry felt all the time. If so, he was no longer sure if he feared for his charge so much as felt sympathy for him.

“I will take you back to your Houses,” he told Draco and the Gryffindors he’d brought with him. He paused, and swept his eyes over the gaping Ravenclaws beneath him. “I will also summon Professor Flitwick to attend to you,” he told them. “If you have questions about why I have done this, check Rovenan’s left arm. But first,” and he swept his wand around and down, “abscindo manulaes laevaes!”
The left sleeve of every student in the room fell away, exposing their forearms. Snape raked them with cold eyes, searching for some sign of the Dark Mark. He didn’t know whether or not he should relax when he saw none. There could be Ravenclaws in their rooms who were Marked. He would certainly tell Filius to look for it.

Right before he himself checked his Slytherins, and then turned himself into Minerva and let her decide if she could continue to employ a teacher who had just killed a student.

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Draco returned to the dungeons in stunned silence, pacing alone beside Professor Snape after they’d spoken to Professor Flitwick, and delivered the Weasleys and Granger and Connor to Gryffindor Tower. He still didn’t know what to make of the utter collapse of their vengeance plan. In an abstract way, he supposed it was for the best. They weren’t going to get into trouble for their actions, not when so much else had happened, and Rovenan definitely wouldn’t be bothering Harry again.

On the other hand, the thought that there had been at least one Death Eater in the school filled him with deep shock, and the impulse to return to the hospital wing again and make sure that Harry was still safe.

And then there was the fact that Rovenan had managed to learn of their vengeance plan at all. Draco had already figured out the only way he could have learned of it. He longed to look at Professor Snape and know that he had been wrong, but he hadn’t developed the courage to raise his eyes yet.

Snape stopped him with one hand on his shoulder as they reached the door to the Slytherin common room. Draco looked up at him at last, and saw the knowledge of war in his House Head’s face, more clearly than he had ever seen it before.

“How many in Slytherin House knew of this vengeance plan, Draco?” Snape asked softly.

“Lots of people,” Draco whispered.

Snape nodded. “And one of them betrayed it to Rovenan.” He closed his eyes in a long, slow blink. “You know as well as I do that, given the circumstances, only one kind of loyalty could trump the loyalty of Slytherin to Slytherin.”

“I know,” said Draco weakly. So, I wasn’t wrong. Someone in our House is a Death Eater.

Snape took a deep breath, then spoke the password and stepped into the common room.

It was quiet. The whole of the House, it seemed to Draco, sat on the couches and divans and chairs by the hearths, waiting for them. They would have heard what had happened by now, of course. News never stayed still for long in Hogwarts, and the prefects, patrolling the corridors, would have brought back rumors, and then confirmation, of the battle in Ravenclaw Tower.

Blaise snapped out, “Everyone, stand up now.”

Everyone stood up, and turned their bared left forearms towards Snape and Draco. Draco felt his heart seize up as he realized what they were proving. He relaxed a bit with every expanse of unmarked skin he looked at.

Snape said, in a voice like the Draught of Living Death, “Where is Montague?”

Draco closed his eyes.

“Gone to the Dark Lord.” Blaise’s voice was calm, and surprisingly steady, though Draco knew that, if he looked, Blaise’s dark face would be nearly gray. “We found enough evidence in his room to convict him, sir. Nothing very useful, but some of it incriminating.”

Snape made a low noise. Draco wondered, with that same odd interest that had made him wonder what Granger was thinking on their way to Ravenclaw Tower, whether he was blaming himself for not keeping one of his students from treading the same mistaken path he had followed.

It’s not his fault, Draco thought, and reached up to ghost his hand across Snape’s elbow, wondering if he could convey that message with just a touch.

Snape shook his head, and seemed to snap out of his trance. “I am going to speak with the Headmistress,” he said. “None of you
will wear left sleeves for the next week.” He didn’t ask whether they understood, whether they would obey. They would, or he would know the reason why.

Blaise and Millicent, who stood the closest to Snape, actually bowed their heads as he left. Draco took a deep, shaky breath, and sat down on the couch with his yearmates. For the first time all term, Pansy reached out and took his hand, though she didn’t speak.

“Harry’s going to be all right,” Blaise whispered. Draco looked up, and saw the force of new conviction in his eyes. Blaise had never been as close to Harry as the rest of them, perhaps because his mother wasn’t allied as deeply as Hawthorn Parkinson, or the Bulstrodes, or Draco’s own parents. Now, though, he obviously understood how close the war could scrape to them, and what the opposite side looked like. It might be a commitment born less of loyalty than of fear, but he would stay true, Draco thought, and other reasons might grow later. “I promise, Draco. He really will be. You have no idea how he’s going to be guarded, from now on. And the rest of the school is going to see just how free of the Dark Lord Slytherin House can be.”

Draco thought it was weak of him, that it was happening mostly because he was too tired to feel anything else, but he found hope in Blaise’s words. He nodded, once, and then let the rest of them hustle him off to bed. A few other Slytherins left as they went up the stairs. Draco blinked at them, then nodded again. They would use their cunning to evade the professors and prefects of other Houses, and get to the hospital wing unnoticed.

Harry would not be alone or unguarded tonight, perhaps not ever again, until the war was over.

Draco felt a little bubble of fierce pride pop up through the numbness that had largely overtaken him. The other Houses have always looked down on Slytherin. Well, now they’re going to see that we’re more like them than they thought, and not just when we ally with them to avenge a Housemate. We can be as proud, as independent, as determined to fight, as they can.

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Snape stood in silence before Minerva. He had told her the whole tale, and he had no idea what would happen next.

He could not help remembering another night, when he had come to Albus, and Albus had looked him in the eye, and in the soul, and tested him under Veritaserum, and then accepted his repentance as true. Snape had known the man Albus was, then. He did not know the woman Minerva had become, not that well. He knew she might sack him, might turn him over to Ministry Aurors, who would not be gentle with a former Death Eater who had acted like a Death Eater again, or might do nothing. He had no way to be sure.

“Severus.”

Snape glanced up. Minerva was leaning forward, her gaze brilliant, catching the light from the torches on the walls like gleaming cat’s eyes.

“You say that the evil from the Dark Mark would have poisoned the school?” she questioned.

Snape nodded. “Dark Arts first, then Light spells. Any magic performed in Hogwarts after that first half hour would have killed the person who cast it. Rovenan would have died eventually, but not until the poison had slaughtered anyone who had gone unwarned.”

Minerva breathed in, breathed out, and waited as if for a sign, though Snape didn’t know what it could be. Then she raised her eyes and said, “You defended the Ravenclaws, the school, a student in your own House, and your ward, against a Death Eater. So far as I am concerned, you deserve commendation for that, not condemnation.”

Snape closed his eyes. He could feel relief crashing down over him, a torrent so great that he could not really respond to it as yet. He waited.

“I will contact Mr. Rovenan’s parents,” Minerva went on. “I will also see about securing his body, so that no—ah—surgery can be performed after the fact to disguise what he was. And I will speak for you, Severus. I will fight for you. You warned him, you asked him to reconsider what he was doing, and he did it anyway. And this was after he had used a lethal curse on another student.” Minerva’s hands tightened on the edges of her desk. Snape half-expected to see them grow claws.

“Death Eaters,” she said.

Snape blinked at her, not quite understanding the chain of her thoughts.
“There were *Death Eaters* in my school,” said Minerva, and she rose and paced back and forth. “Threatening *my students*.”

She swung around, and Snape fought the urge to take a step backward. Voldemort had just vexed Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts, very, very thoroughly indeed.

“Go to sleep, Severus,” Minerva said quietly. “I will reassign some of the wards to watch and guard Harry, and I will speak with Filius about his Ravenclaws, and whether he has discovered any more of—them—in his House. Know that you have my gratitude, and that I will fight for you.” Her eyes were still brilliant with fury. “Anyone who tries to hurt you, or suggest sacking you for defending the school, will have to go through me.”

Snape nodded several times. He didn’t seem able to do anything else. He had thought before that Minerva McGonagall would be a very different sort of leader from Albus Dumbledore, but he had not realized just how different. She was not going to use manipulation. She very obviously did not need it.

He walked slowly back towards his offices, though he surrounded his body with shields and wards so that no one could sneak up and attack him on the way there. No one tried.

When he reached the office, he looked down at the ruined modification of the Draught of Peace, and Vanished it.

Then he called his Pensieve to him from across the room. He knew that he should follow Minerva’s sound advice, and sleep soon. The past three days had cost him more than he realized he had to give.

But, first, he wanted to place certain memories he had in the Pensieve, and attempt to discover what they meant. When he had been up in Ravenclaw Tower, trying frantically to figure out whether anyone was about to cast Dark Arts in the midst of Rovenan’s befouling, he had felt *something* else—a kind of drifting fog, a mist, a vicious presence that nevertheless did not feel like Dark Arts. The memory had tried to depart his mind the moment he noticed it, but he had trapped the impressions and slid them into an Occlumency pool, so fast that they didn’t have a chance to escape.

He drew out the battle, placed it into the Pensieve, and then lowered his head to go under the surface of the silvery liquid. He would watch, and try not to get distracted by the sight of a dying boy too like the one he had been, and figure out what the hell that mist was.

It might be something that could hurt Harry. If it was, then Snape would find it out, and destroy it. It was part of what he, a man with chosen loyalties, did.

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*Intermission: Power Play*

Albus kept his eyes closed even as Hestia Jones walked around him, now and then murmuring soothing phrases or casting spells that eased his cramped muscles. It had been dangerous for Argus Veritaserum to arrange to sneak Hestia in again, and she could not stay long. Truly, Albus was not sure that it was worth it. He could have ruminated on his own failure just as effectively under the Still-Beetle imprisonment, and had many times over the last few weeks, as he realized how and why his spell had gone wrong.

That didn’t keep his mind from returning to it now, and raking his own failure over the coals obsessively.

He had cast the spell intending to change anyone’s perception of Harry from a favorable one to one that would hinder Harry, and keep him emotionally unprepared for opposing his parents and Albus. His friends should have become overprotective. His allies should have made mistakes in their rage that would get them killed. His enemies should have tried everything in their power to hurt him. Students with slightly negative feelings towards Harry would have them exaggerated, and should have made Hogwarts a battleground for him every day. Albus had known that his spell would leave those caught between two states of mind unaffected—notably, the Lestrange woman Minerva had hired, and werewolves— but they were only a very small portion of the wizarding population. There was no danger that anyone would figure out what was going on, at least, since the spell would steer the thoughts of anyone who did begin to figure it out away from that dangerous information, and then eat the memories.

His thoughts could spread along with the effects of the spell, and he would observe everything that went on, though he was powerless to alter it. Albus had believed that would content him. He would see how Harry slowly collapsed, and realized that the wizarding world on his own was too much for him. He would be a less than effective witness when the time came for Lily’s and James’s trial, and some members of the Wizengamot would be hostile to him, so they were likely to go free. The same thing would happen with Albus, he was sure. More of the public was willing to think him innocent, someone they loved and revered
and knew worked for the good of the wizarding world, than two people who had lived in retirement so intense that their once-
sterling reputations had faded. With Argus’s tireless work in the press, and the spell, and Lily and James gone free, and even
Harry likely to plead for him at the last, Albus was sure that he would see the outside of the Ministry again in March.

It hadn’t happened. The spell had taken hold in Ravenclaw at Hogwarts, the House it had identified as the one with the highest
level of hostile feeling for Harry, and influenced its students just as Albus had hoped. Some members of the Wizengamot, and
those in the Ministry, muttered about how they had never trusted Harry; one could not trust a child with Lord-level power who
refused to Declare for Light. A few of those who favored Harry, like Auror Mallory, had indeed become overprotective.

But Harry’s allies and those closest to him—his brother, Severus, young Malfoy—had continued unchanged in mind. Albus had
been startled, but concluded that, of course, powerful Dark wizards like Charles Rosier-Henlin were cautious and not used to
moving immediately, no matter what their emotions might urge them to do. And Severus was limited by his position at Hogwarts
from leaving for long periods of time, and young Malfoy was limited by his age and his need to be near Harry constantly.
Eventually, the balance would tip, and they would make Harry’s life as miserable as his enemies were doing.

And still it had not happened, and only on the night of the Woodhouse battle, when Albus had had the opportunity to compare
the thoughts of the transformed werewolves to the thoughts of the fighting Dark wizards, had he realized the reason.

The mind of Charles Rosier-Henlin was as unchanged as the mind of Hawthorn Parkinson or Remus Lupin. Henrietta Bulstrode
was a bit more influenced, but then, she was currently more of an enemy than an ally to Harry. Lucius Malfoy’s desire for
vengeance had heightened (and while Albus was sorry for Lily and James, he could not have Hestia reveal Lucius without
revealing his own spell), but he had conceived the plan on his own, before Albus began to spread his change. The others seemed
in the same boat as Charles and the werewolves.

When he pulled back and looked at them more carefully, then Albus had seen what appeared to his eyes as numerous tiny silver
hands at work in each of their minds, doing nothing but unbind his webs as fast as they formed. They could not give Harry’s allies
the memories of his spell, because Harry himself didn’t know the spell existed. But they could and did prevent those webs of
compulsion from tightening much, unless the person in question already had a bit of evil in mind.

Harry was so much a vates that he had spread an unconscious influence of his own in response to Albus’s spell, to tear it apart. He
wanted freedom, and endless possibilities, for those he cared the most about, and for those who had chosen to follow him. If they
volunteered to be overprotective, or to turn against him, that was one thing. If he did not know them well, or if he blamed them
for something, as he blamed Auror Mallory for the arrest of his parents and Albus, his protection did not extend over them. But
Harry and his magic and his will would shield the people whom he felt he did owe something to from an outsider attempting to
transform them against their choices.

Albus had never thought that he would face a true vates. Even after the boy began to show signs, there was still a large chance
that he might turn aside from the path. How he could maintain it? Falco Parkinson had assured Albus that it was impossible, that
one would have to sacrifice his magic in order to free the magical creatures and allow other wizards and witches to grow to their
greatest extent. And no Lord-level wizard would ever do that. Their magic was too much a part of them. It sang within them, and
they either lived with it and used it for the good of the wizarding world, or they had a need to increase it and corrupt others with
it, as had happened to Tom.

But it seemed that that had not happened with Harry. He was vates, un binder, destroyer of peace and safety. He was so much a
vates that he sensed webs as they were forming and fought them away. Albus suspected that Harry’s magic would have revealed
the memory-destroying portion of the spell, too, save that it actually destroyed the memories and didn’t simply bind them. Harry
appeared incapable of tolerating a web anywhere near him.

It frightened Albus immensely to think that his beautiful, delicate wizarding world, that fragile soap bubble he had fought so hard
to protect, might be shattered at last. The wizarding world was webs all the way down, webs that insured most wizards and
witches never needed to think about things like where their next meal was coming from or a centaur attacking them. Albus loved
the world as it was. How could he stand aside and see it torn apart by well-intentioned but ill-guided revolution, by a will to
freedom that would not even take note of all the wills to tameness standing to oppose it?

“My lord.”

Albus blinked and came out of his daze. Hestia gently held a cup of water to his lips, and he drank and then nodded to her.

“I only need cast one spell today, my dear,” he said, and then closed his eyes.

He would not end his compulsion—not yet. Severus was on the brink of figuring it out, but he would still not know what it meant,
having no acquaintance with spells of that kind. It would depend on him speaking to just the right person, such as the Lestrange woman, and Albus was willing to risk that that might happen. He had been willing to take gambles so far, such as vengeance falling on Lily and James, in order to defend the larger wizarding world. This was only another of them.

But he did murmur, “Transformo Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

His compulsion coiling lazily around Kingsley’s mind tightened into a web. Albus suffered a brief burst of gladness that he could at least control Kingsley, whom Harry did not like much and had not shielded.

He felt sorrow as he concentrated, pouring what remained of his magical strength after the wide-spreading compulsion into this spell. He was sacrificing another of those who followed him, as he had sacrificed Lily and James to Lucius Malfoy’s vengeance, as he had once sacrificed Harry and Connor to Voldemort’s attack. But he was well-used to these decisions now, and he knew he was saving something larger than any one person: the wizarding world he fiercely loved and would not see crumble. He was willing to be damned, as long as the wizarding world could survive.

He knew matters had gone too far. Whether it was on purpose or not, Harry was a fully-fledged *vates*, intent on performing his dangerous miracles of change and transformation. It was not to be borne, not when he did not think enough of other wizards and witches and their welfare.

“Kingsley Shacklebolt, damnari inter sicarios,” Albus murmured.

The compulsion funneled in a very specific direction, gnawed a small home for itself in the midst of Kingsley’s mind, and settled there. It would spring to life only on the day of Lily and James’s trial, the sixteenth of November, which was not very far away now.

Albus’s heart was aching when he opened his eyes, and tears filled them, but he met Hestia’s eyes and said, “You will tell no one of what you heard here?”

The young witch stood proud and strong, all but radiating loyalty. She shook her head. “No, my lord. Never. You are only doing what you have to do to protect our world.”

Albus nodded back at her, and then let her use the Still-Beetle to confine him again. At once his mind roamed out on the wings of his spell, seeking to watch Harry, this time. His thoughts were filled with mourning.

*I am sorry, Harry. But when it comes down to a danger that may threaten everyone else, there can be no faltering. If I do this one thing with a firm hand, then our world is saved—twice over, because the prophecy will have to choose your brother. I am sorry. But I think that, if you were in my position, if you were in the position you occupied even three years ago when you thought about other things than your own goals and life, you would agree with me.*

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Chapter Thirty-Five: Stronger Than You Think

By the time he was finally able to leave the hospital wing, Harry had become used to the idea that the world had changed, but he still hadn’t adapted well to one feature of it that looked to become permanent.

“There’s really no reason for you to keep attending me now,” he told Adrian Belby, who was the only one of the three Slytherins escorting him from the hospital wing back to the common room whom he knew at all well. “Madam Pomfrey says I’m past the danger from Rovenan’s curse, and I can see people coming more easily than I could lying in a bed. I should be fine.”

Adrian just looked at him. He was vibrating slightly with a pride that never seemed to leave him. Harry had seen the first signs of it when he showed up for his first round of guard duty with the bare left arm that he still sported. “You need to be guarded, Harry,” he said simply. “So we’ll stay and guard you.”

“That’s what I’m trying to *tell* you,” said Harry, keeping his temper with an effort. At least when Blaise or Millicent or Draco were with him, it was like talking with friends; he could forget they were there to protect him. Adrian and the others took it all so seriously. “I don’t need guards now.”

“Yes, you do.”

Harry jumped. Adrian and the others reached for their wands. The Weasley twins ignored them all, falling into step with Harry as
if they’d just met for a bit of a friendly chat. Harry smiled in spite of himself when he saw their bare left arms. Each bore a constantly moving lime-green tattoo that said **VOLDEMORT IS AN IDIOT**. Now and then, the insult changed.

“We’re happy to share the duty,” said the one Harry thought was Fred. He spoke to Adrian. “We have NEWT Transfiguration first thing on Monday, but that’s the only class it would actually hurt us to miss. We can skive off the others and send illusions to them. What times do you most need an extra pair of hands?”

Adrian thought about it. Harry opened and closed his mouth several times. No one, of course, paid the slightest attention to him.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t I get a say in this?”

“No,” said Adrian, “because sometimes you’re an idiot, Harry.” It sounded as if he’d learned that by rote. He turned to Fred. “Tuesday mornings are thin right now. So are Wednesday afternoons. And you never know when someone might try to take advantage of a Quidditch practice.”

A devilish grin replicated itself on both twins’ faces. “Why, Belby,” said the one Harry thought was George, “you’re actually inviting the Gryffindor Beaters to watch your team’s movements?”

Adrian paused, obviously abashed.

“That’s actually a good idea, Harry,” said another of his guards. She was Catrina Flint-Digsby, the female prefect he’d heard laughing about Marietta Edgecombe’s transformation. She wound a curl of her hair around her finger as she considered him now.

“Gryffindors are a good start,” Harry agreed. “But we have to have some Ravenclaw guards, too, or this all looks useless—like we’re suspecting a House instead of the one member who turned out to have other problems.” He ignored the twins’ laughter and imitations of what they thought Voldemort tempting Rovenan must have looked like. “I want Cho. And Luna. And Draco said there were a few Ravenclaws on the inside of the Tower whom they trusted, who would have gone after Rovenan if they were shut out. I want to know who they are.”

“We do,” said Adrian.

“And would you trust a Slytherin near me faster than a Ravenclaw?” Harry demanded. “You must. All my guards so far have been Slytherin.”

“That’s about to change,” said George.

“Gryffindors are a good start,” Harry agreed. “But we have to have some Ravenclaw guards, too, or this all looks useless—like we’re suspecting a House instead of the one member who turned out to have other problems.” He ignored the twins’ laughter and imitations of what they thought Voldemort tempting Rovenan must have looked like. “I want Cho. And Luna. And Draco said there were a few Ravenclaws on the inside of the Tower whom they trusted, who would have gone after Rovenan if they were shut out. I want to know who they are.”

“Yes, he is,” said Harry, relaxing a bit. “I think we should mix shifts. If you really must, have someone from another House working with the Ravenclaw guards, but also have Hufflepuffs working with Gryffindors, and Gryffindors working with Slytherins. If you really want to do this at all,” he added hopefully. He had the feeling that this would become a charade very soon. People had their marks and their OWLS and their NEWTS and the safety of their families—since there was a War on, after all—to worry about instead of him. Harry didn’t want them to neglect their lives for his.

“We know the Ravenclaws Malfoy meant,” said George. “We can get—“

“Our names for you,” Fred finished. “Pair of pretty—“

“Girls, Harry.” George winked. “Give Malfoy something to be jealous about. Keep him on his toes.”

Harry felt a bit of queasiness in his stomach at the thought of Draco being jealous. He’d had enough of that last Tuesday, Merlin knew. “Don’t tease him,” he said, facing the dungeons again. He was resigned, not surprised, when the twins adopted marching attitudes and kept pace with him and his Slytherins. “Please.”

“No more than he deserves, at least,” said George innocently.
And a Weasley twin’s idea of deserving doesn’t match anyone else’s. Harry shook his head. He could only hope they wouldn’t hurt Draco too badly, or that the Ravenclaw girls weren’t really pretty.

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They were, of course. Fred and George often joked, but not when telling the truth would serve their purposes better. They even made a point of escorting the Ravenclaws over to the Slytherin table that morning, when Harry was trying to enjoy the first normal breakfast he’d had in four days and pretend that he wasn’t the focus of all eyes.

“Harry Potter,” said George ceremoniously, using a Sonorus charm to project his voice to all parts of the Great Hall, “your first volunteer guard has asked me to introduce her. This is Padma Patil, twin sister of Parvati Patil.”

Harry nodded to Padma. He knew her, vaguely. She, of course, looked almost exactly like Parvati, but there was a steady gleam to her eyes that reassured Harry she wouldn’t be as giggly as her sister. She was pretty, though, with large dark eyes, dark skin, and a long sweep of flowing black hair that she kept braided with blue ribbons.

“And this,” said Fred, planting himself in front of the other girl like a knight protecting his lady fair, “is the beauteous, the gracious, the munificent, the beneficent—“

He staggered as though the person standing behind him had hit him. He grinned, and stepped out of the way.

“Isabell Neelda,” he finished.

Harry blinked when he saw Isabell. He had assumed she had to be at least casually connected with someone in another House to want to protect him, the way Padma was to Parvati, but he didn’t know her. She was a sixth-year, so that wasn’t surprising. She had light brown hair, blue eyes, and was beautiful more for her smile than anything else.

She caught his startled gaze, and winked at him, turning her head to the side and putting a finger to her cheek. To anyone else, it probably looked like she was making a flirtatious gesture. Only Harry saw the green-and-gold swirl of the tattoo that shone as the glamour she wore was brushed aside, and then vanished again as she swept her finger back the other way. He relaxed. She was Opalline, connected by blood to Paton.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Harry,” Isabell said, putting her hand out. Harry clasped it and shook. Draco made a sound from the side that was part grunt and part hiss. Harry withdrew his hand quickly, but Isabell didn’t seem to take offense. “I’d like to be the first to apologize for the shameful behavior of my House. The moment Marietta gets out of the hospital wing, I am going to give her such a smack upside the head.”

Harry turned his own head, and saw Draco’s eyes take on an almost manic gleam. Harry had no idea whether his boyfriend had already taken revenge on Marietta, or whether Isabell had simply reminded him to, and had no intention of letting him think about it right now.

“Thank you, Isabell,” he said, and nodded at Padma. “You, too.”

Both Ravenclaws seemed to consider that enough invitation to sit down at the Slytherin table and start eating breakfast. The Weasley twins hovered around for a moment, grinning, but when Draco didn’t oblige them by exploding into an immediate jealous fit, they pulled long faces and went back to eat with their fellow Gryffindors.

“Harry,” Draco murmured into his ear as he leaned across the table to fetch the pancakes.

“What?” Harry asked.

“I don’t think you’d do anything to make me jealous on purpose,” said Draco. “I trust you. But you came near dying the other day. Pardon me if I’m a little protective, and going to watch every Ravenclaw who comes near you like a hawk for the next little while. It’s just the way I am.”

Harry relaxed. It could have been far worse.

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Minerva sat calmly waiting for Aland and Julianne Rovenan. She had a Gryffindor scarf wound around her neck. She didn’t need it; her office was perfectly warm with the fire in the hearth, and it wasn’t yet so cold outside that a Scottish witch required
protection from the elements. But she had wanted to wear it, to have that rich tumble of gold and red around her when she faced
the parents of the boy Severus had killed, so she did.

The Death Eater boy Severus had killed.

Minerva adjusted the scarf, and nodded. Yes. That made the difference. She was sorry for the parents who had lost their son; even
an accidental death at Hogwarts was always anguish to report. And during the First War, when Light wizard after Light wizard
had perished and she had had to bring the official letters carried by ravens to their children, Minerva had learned to know almost
every variation of anguish and grief a face might wear. She had never got used to any of them.

But she had gone on bringing the letters and reporting the accidental deaths. Albus had relied on her to do that even then. So this
was not a new task. Yes, this time the student had died at the hands of a teacher, and Minerva had had that teacher go right on
teaching Potions. She didn’t care. She would not run. She would not take even the diplomatic measures that Albus would have
taken, canceling Potions classes or having someone else cover them until such time as “the matter was cleared up,” to use a
phrase he had favored.

She knew what the Rovenan parents intended to do to her. She would still not back down.

A knock sounded on the door, though the wards in the staircase had already let Minerva know they were coming. She called,
“Please do come in, Mr. and Mrs. Rovenan.”

No pause; they were probably too occupied by their grief to wonder how she had known for sure it was them. The door opened,
and they entered. Minerva took the time to study them in the few moments before they sat down in their chairs and leaned
forward to stare at her.

Aland Rovenan had gone to a private tutor instead of coming to Hogwarts, and Minerva knew little of him. A proud man, said
some of her sources, but others claimed that he was only shy. Right now, though, looking into the pale, pinched face in which his
son’s blue eyes shone, Minerva had the feeling that he would have no trouble finding words. He had come to demand what he saw
as justice for his dead child, and he would have it.

Julianne was a different matter. She’d been a Hogwarts student thirty years ago, and Minerva remembered her with some
fondness. She’d been skilled in Transfiguration, and earned the most NEWTS ever in the subject at the time, though the record
was broken a few years later. She had blond hair, and the yellow eyes common to some of the pureblooded Light families. She’d
been in Gryffindor. The worst thing that Minerva remembered being true of her was her merciless nature when roused. She had a
hawk’s gaze, and a hawk’s soul.

Julianne started, as Minerva had thought she would. “Headmistress,” she said, respect like frost in her voice. “We have sent a
letter to the board of governors. A representative of theirs will meet us here in a few minutes. I trust that you have owled them and
given them the password to your office?”

“Oh, of course,” said Minerva politely. She could be polite. These were grieving parents. And since they had been kind enough to tell
her what they intended to do beforehand, she’d had plenty of time to ponder and react. As she’d said in her letter, the governors
were welcome in Hogwarts at any time. Two of them had walked through the school the day after Gilbert’s death, seeing for
themselves that there were no more Death Eaters in any of the other Houses.

“Enough, Julianne.” That was Aland, leaning forward, his hands clutching the sides of his chair. “I want an explanation from this
woman before we demand that they sack her. I want to know why the hell she didn’t go to Ravenclaw Tower herself and preserve
Gilbert’s life.” He closed his eyes, and a sob rose up in his throat. “From the reports I heard, she let several students try to take
vengeance for what Gilbert did to the Potter boy, and then Severus Snape went after him and killed him. And it was all with your
tact permission, Headmistress!” His eyes snapped open, and he stared at her. “I want to know where the hell you were.”

“In my office,” said Minerva quietly. “I had no idea that vengeance was planned, I assure you. I would say that the students were
amply punished by what they encountered. As for Severus Snape—”

“We are asking that the board of governors sack him, too,” said Julianne, and gave her a sharp, sweet smile. Minerva was
reminded that she’d had a special hatred for Slytherins. “Just so that we’re clear.”

“Of course,” Minerva showed her own teeth in return. Julianne was bird-like enough to rouse her own feline hunting instincts.
“Severus Snape performed his duty to this school. You will know the story of his past. As such, he was aware of what the Dark
Mark could do. Gilbert would have poisoned Hogwarts with the Mark if it kept burning. Professor Snape asked him to make it
stop burning. Gilbert refused. So Professor Snape did what sometimes must be done in a time of war, and killed him.”
She stopped abruptly, blinking at the image of the one her wards had told her was on the way up her stairs. Neither of the Rovenan parents appeared to have noticed her distraction, however. In fact, Aland took it as an excuse to jump back into the conversational fray.

“I don’t believe my son was really a Death Eater,” he said. “We haven’t seen any proof.”

Minerva raised her eyebrows. “Gilbert’s body is in the hospital wing, under a preservation spell. I assumed you would wish to bury him in as perfect a condition as could be achieved. I will take you to see the corpse myself when our meeting is done, and you may see the Mark on his arm.”

Aland hesitated. Julianne narrowed his eyes. “He cannot have been serious, then,” she said. “Perhaps he used a spell to cast the Mark on himself in play. We know the reason that he used the spell against the Potter boy. He was upset because of what had happened to the girl he loves.”

Minerva narrowed her eyes in turn. “Forgive me, Madam Rovenan,” she said, deliberately using too high a title of respect, “but I was unaware that you considered young love a reason to try and kill another student.”

“That was another exaggerated portion of the report that reached us, of course.” Julianne clenched her fingers together like a hawk binding to a mouse. “We have heard people say that Gilbert used the Entrail-Expelling Curse. That cannot be true. We raised our son right. He would never turn to Dark Arts.”

“And yet he did, in front of the Great Hall,” said Minerva. “I can fetch all the witnesses that you like on that, Madam. But I see that our representative from the board of governors is here now, so perhaps we should suspend our conversation for a moment until he enters?”

Julianne inclined her head just as a sharp knock sounded on the door. Shaking her head over the ironies of fate, Minerva called, “Come in, sir.”

Lucius Malfoy had a very predatory walk when he wanted to, and he had made his way to the center of the office before either of the Rovenan parents had turned to see him. He took Minerva’s hand and bowed low over it, his eyes bright with a mixture of pleasure and dangerous amusement. “Headmistress, dear Lady,” he murmured. “Always a breath of morning, to be in your presence.”

Minerva held his gaze. She had faced Lucius Malfoy across several battlefields in the First War, had nearly died by his Killing Curse three times, and had nearly Transfigured him twice. And now they were allies. At least she thought she could live better in this violently changing world than Albus ever could have.

“Mr. Malfoy,” she said. “If you would take your place?” She drew her wand and Transfigured one of the bookshelves into a chair for him. Lucius inclined his head in thanks, and sat down.

That was when Julianne Rovenan recovered enough of her breath to protest.

“Headmistress!” she all but squawked. “You cannot mean to have him here!”

“And why not?” Lucius cocked his head to the side and regarded the woman quizzically. “Much as I am sorry for your loss, Mrs. Rovenan, I hardly think that you can object to me on the grounds of my not having lost a child.”

“Not that! Do you deny that your son is Harry Potter’s boyfriend, and that your presence here is therefore a conflict of interest?” Julianne had stood. She had a gleam in her eyes that said she was soaring in for the kill. Minerva stifled a groan. Julianne did get like this.

“I don’t really think it’s a conflict of interest, Mrs. Rovenan.” Lucius continued with the thoughtful frown. “After all, we are not here to try and punish my son, or Harry Potter. We are here to determine whether Headmistress McGonagall and Professor Severus Snape should be retained in their present positions, or sacked. The governors agreed to send me because I once knew Severus Snape, and should be able to tell if he is lying or not.” He lightly touched his left arm. “Also, it was understood that you had some questions about whether the Dark Mark on your son’s body is, in fact, the true one. I can see why you would not want to trust Professor Snape’s word on the matter. After all, he was not Gilbert’s Head of House, nor his friend. I assure you, I can identify it. I, myself, am Marked.”

“A servant of You-Know-Who, then.” Aland was staring at Lucius, his face white with an emotion Minerva thought was loathing,
this time.

“Never willingly,” said Lucius at once, enough pride in his voice for five Rovenan parents. “I was under the Imperius Curse at the
time, and reeling from the death of my father. I was captured, held, and used against my will. I escaped Azkaban by testifying
against my former comrades, that is true, but most of them had served willingly. I never did.”

_ Liar_, Minerva thought, staring at Lucius. _He has too strong a will to ever surrender to being a servant._

“We still cannot trust your word,” Julianne insisted.

“And why not?” Lucius turned a wounded look on her.

“You are a Dark wizard!” Julianne flung those words at him as if daring him to deny them.

Lucius’s eyes lost their innocence for the first time. “I am also a pureblood back to the time of the Norman Conquest,” he said. “I
challenge you to find one shred of dishonor according to the pureblood rituals in my family history. You will find none.” He rose
to his feet. “If you really wish me gone, I will go. Of course, the board will have to send someone other than the governor you
requested. It seems that he is married to your sister. Now, that _would_ be a conflict of interest.”

Julianne turned her head away. Aland said, abruptly, “We want justice for Gilbert. That’s all. If he really did use the Entrail-
Expelling Curse, if he really was a Death Eater, then—then I want to know.” His voice shook, but steadied when Minerva looked
at him. “I want to see his body.”

Minerva nodded. “But we must wait until the board sends someone other than Mr. Malfoy to conduct the investigation.”

“If he can identify the Dark Mark, then I want him,” said Aland.

“Aland!” Julianne turned towards her husband.

“No, Julianne.” Aland was shivering like a stake in a high wind, but he stood and put one arm around her shoulders. “I—we have
to _know_, don’t we? I want to know. Either they’re all terribly mistaken about Gilbert, and then we can sack a Professor who
would kill a student for no good reason at all and make Hogwarts safer for the rest of the children here. Or they’re telling the
truth, and there are horrible things about him we never knew. I want to know what those are. I want to know my son.”

Julianne leaned into her husband, and said nothing. Minerva wondered how much of her feral intensity had been a mask to hide
the tear-blasted woman within.

Aland looked at Lucius and Minerva over his wife’s head, and nodded. “I think we’re ready to see Gilbert’s body now.”

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Afterwards, after the parents had seen their son’s body and suffered the painful shock of knowing that almost everything they’d
believed about him was wrong, after the tears and the recriminations and the calm responses and the apologies for the
recriminations, after the Rovenans had gone away shocked into silence but promising to talk to the newspapers about what had
really happened, Lucius walked back to the dungeons with Severus.

He didn’t know why. Severus had simply looked at him, and Lucius had recognized the look in his eyes that he usually got before
a Death Eater raid. So he’d made his excuses to the Headmistress about taking tea in her office, and walked back into dungeons
that still felt like home to him, even though he’d gone to Hogwarts half a lifetime ago.

Severus led him straight to his offices, a motion that made Lucius raise his eyebrows. At least the man had sense enough not to let
him hear his password. Lucius really would have had to punish him if he’d been enough of an idiot for that.

Not that the man was an idiot, of course, not with the way he’d handled Gilbert Rovenan—publicly, asking him to stop, just the
way calculated to raise the least amount of fuss. Lucius was sure that Severus had done it for just the reasons the Headmistress
indicated, to stop the school from being poisoned. He was also sure that Severus hadn’t been without pleasure in the deed, given
what the boy had done to Harry.

Lucius still wanted to snarl when he thought about it. If the professors hadn’t already checked their Houses for more Marked
students, he would have done it himself. To have something like that happen to their young _vates_ in the middle of all Hogwarts’s
wards and protections was unthinkable. And then to have his parents doubt that he’d been a Death Eater, and used a Dark curse!
Sometimes, the sheer thickness of Light wizards made Lucius repine that he’d turned from Voldemort. Of course, with Harry around, the Light wizards shut up and did as they were told. It was the only thing that made Lucius tolerate having them as part of the alliance.

“What did you want me to see?” he asked, once they were fully inside the office. He didn’t doubt that Severus had brought him here to see something. Otherwise, he could have cast spells that wouldn’t allow them to be overhead and told him the truth elsewhere in Hogwarts. Severus had always been good at that kind of thing.

“This.” Severus was already turning around, a Pensieve in his hands. Lucius took a wary step closer, his hand on his wand. He didn’t really think that Severus would turn on him, but one survived as a Dark wizard and a Slytherin by trusting one’s paranoia, and he knew all sorts of spells that could be cast with a Pensieve. The Dark Lord had once kept a prisoner alive for seventeen days with one.

“It won’t hurt you, Lucius,” said Severus, catching on to his caution then and giving him an exasperated look. “Draco would never forgive me if anything happened to you, and what Draco doesn’t forgive, neither does Harry.”

Slightly reassured, Lucius still waited for Severus to put the Pensieve down and dip his head below the surface before he followed.

He found himself in Ravenclaw Tower while Severus asked Gilbert Rovenan to lower his wand. He stood on the floor, though, a distance from the battle, and he’d already heard Severus describe it, so there must be some other reason he was there. He looked around.

And then he felt it. He stiffened. There was a drifting mist in the air, coiling within the minds of everyone around them, carrying powerful Light magic and a whispering compulsion. Lucius focused on the whispers, willing them into clarity, and thought he heard Harry Potter before Severus, standing beside him, distracted him.

“I’ve been able to bring them that close,” he said. He had his back turned to the battle, as if he couldn’t bear to watch himself kill the boy again. Lucius doubted that, of course. Probably, there was nothing very interesting in a battle he’d had to relive several times. “Close enough to know that it’s a spell trained on Harry. But I don’t know much else about it.”

Lucius tried, as best he could, to examine the state of his own mind. He couldn’t discover much, but he appeared to be free of the spell. That didn’t reassure him. “Why haven’t you told anyone else?”

Snape snarled. “I have tried. The information slides from their minds the moment I speak of it. The spell can defend itself, Lucius. I think I only noticed it on Wednesday because I was specifically searching for signs that someone was about to try Dark Arts with the Mark burning, and then I trapped the memory in an Occlumency pool. We can discuss the thing, here. Outside the Pensieve, I retain the memory, but I am a trained Occlumens. No one else seems to.”

Lucius held up a hand, his eyes closing sharply. “Wait. Wait.”

Severus, to his credit, waited. Lucius was not sure that he could have done the same thing, if someone else had told him that much and no more. He dived into the depths of his memory, seeking out what he’d heard one day in a sleepy, dozy History of Magic classroom, when he’d forced himself to stay awake throughout the lecture to win a bet with one of his yearmates.

There are Light spells that affect the mind and influence the perceptions, that are capable, for example, of converting one’s perceptions of a particular person into unfavorable ones—that is, ones that will hinder his actions and prevent him from doing whatever it is that you wish him to do. They are rarely used. For one thing, they require an enormous amount of power, and they would drain even most Lords and Ladies of Light. For a second, they are considered as immoral, skirting the edges of Dark Arts, a weapon to be raised only in war, if then. And for a third, they are subtle, and take a long time to work, time which may drain the wizard or witch fueling them, and they have odd limitations. They cannot cross water, for example.

Lucius remembered no more, because he had fallen asleep, but those words had entered his mind and burned there with peculiar intensity. His mind had been on the edge of dreaming, and everything seemed more real then, as his brain strove to distinguish between dream and waking. At any rate, he was sure that his information was correct, and that this was what the spell was.

And he was sure that only one Light wizard in Britain at the moment would have the strength and the motivation to use such a spell.

“Dumbledore,” he spat, opening his eyes.
Severus nodded tightly. “So I assumed. And I assume that it is responsible for the recent spate of attacks on Harry, both in the *Prophet* and in the school. But how to spread the word of it, when you will lose the memory the moment you step out of the Pensieve and I cannot talk of it to anyone?”

“Can you write it down?”

Snape shrugged. “I tried that, too, but though I have seen my reader’s eyes widen, they forget about it the moment they look away from the parchment.”

Lucius cursed. “Then I think we must have our *vates* break the compulsion,” he said. “Bring him into the Pensieve, show him what is happening, and ask him to snap the web.” He narrowed his eyes at Severus, struck with a sudden thought. “In fact, why haven’t you done that already?”

Severus’s hesitation revealed the reason. Lucius rolled his eyes. “I know you care for the boy,” he said. “So do we all. But I assure you, he would not thank you for trying to relieve him of this ‘stress.’ He would wish to be rid of it, because it influences others.”

“I suppose I needed someone else to say it.” Severus shrugged. “Do you think you will recover the memory of this once the spell is broken?”

“I hope so, but I cannot be certain,” said Lucius. “At the least, you should be able to speak and write of the spell then, and you will convince others if you ask them to compare their feelings about Harry then to the feelings they had about him for the last few months.” His mind was racketing and clicking along like the Hogwarts Express. “Doesn’t Harry have a contact in Rita Skeeter?”

Severus’s face drew down in a sneer. “*That* woman—”

“Is still a better reporter than any other on the *Prophet*, these days,” Lucius cut in. “Ask him to contact her. Ask her to release an exclusive story on the effects of Dumbledore’s spell, with proof on how he broke it. Not that *Prophet* readers need the truth. The very suggestion of this will muddy the waters.”

“His parents’ trial is in only a few weeks,” Snape warned with a light snarl. “I would not want to put—”

“More stress on him.” Lucius tossed his head impatiently. “It is likely that he will never have to live through a period of stress this intense in the next year. I would rather eliminate any chance of a Light Lord gaining control over the minds of his allies, and Harry himself, than see his parents or that Light Lord go free because of an undetected spell and your tender sensibilities, Severus.”

“You do not understand what he is putting himself through—”

“I understand that he is stronger than you think,” said Lucius. He locked eyes with his old comrade, and didn’t back down. “Ask others if I cannot convince you. Narcissa, Hawthorn, Regulus. And he is *vates*. This is within his rights, his responsibilities, his duties as one who bears that name. He will do it, and he will do it eagerly.”

Severus bowed his head. Lucius smirked at him, and then stepped back and out of the Pensieve.

He gripped his thoughts as he did so, trying to retain the memory of Dumbledore’s spell. Of course, the man had been responsible for the wards of Hogwarts, but it seemed he had never bothered to set one that would detect Death Eaters in the school. Or perhaps the Headmistress had never bothered to set one. Lucius would speak to her about that before he left. He would offer his own Dark Mark as a test subject, if she needed something to anchor the ward to.

*Wasn’t I thinking about something else?*

He shook his head, and left Severus’s office without a backward glance. He did know that they’d been talking about Harry, and he’d said the boy was stronger than Severus thought.

*And he is. Stronger than anyone else I have ever known. He survives everything, and that is what must be done before one can do anything else.*

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Harry saw doom fall with the *Daily Prophet* on Monday morning.

The owls had to circle the room before they got to the Slytherin table. That meant the other tables got their newspapers first. One by one, Harry saw smiles wither and die on their faces, and then they turned their heads and locked their eyes on him. Shock and horror and condemnation made their expressions change.

Harry closed his eyes when Draco received his newspaper. He waited until the sharp noise that said Draco had shaken it out, and then he gazed bleakly at the front page.

There was a photograph of himself, close and exceptionally clear. As Harry watched, he held up an Augurey chick, a greenish-black bird that was struggling awkwardly in his hand. He gave the camera a twisted sneer, and then smashed the chick’s head open with a stone, and shocking violence.

Harry looked at the headline. The byline, of course, was Argus Veritaserum’s; *that* was not surprising. It was the headline that did the damage.

**HARRY POTTER: VATES OR MURDERER OF MAGICAL CREATURES?**

*Anonymous witnesses speak out about the horror of ‘Potter Revels’*

Harry swallowed his sickness, and clenched his hand on the edge of the table. He *knew* this wasn’t true, of course not, but he knew what the article would say before reading it. It would claim that this supposed killing had happened during the time he was in hospital, only pretending to be recovering from the Entrail-Expelling Curse. It would hint darkly that he killed innocent and useful magical creatures, that his ambitions as *vates* were just a cover, and that there was a reason no one saw Dementors or unicorns any more. It would include many tantalizing details about how the murders had happened.

It would not be believed, not by everyone. But in the tense and heated atmosphere that had led to some members of Ravenclaw House who were not Death Eaters attacking him, which had led to the Veritaserum articles in the first place, Harry feared that the picture and the articles would do their work. Some people really would swallow it whole, and others would believe because they wanted to or it was convenient to do so.

He could find nothing else to think of for long moments as he watched “himself” smash Augurey after Augurey, until he felt a hand on his shoulder and Snape murmured in his ear, “Harry, come with me immediately.”

Numbly, Harry climbed to his feet and followed, wondering what the magical creatures would believe, wondering how many wizards would turn against him, and praying that he could somehow wake up from this dream and have it not be real.

And underneath all that, burning and climbing like a dragon tunneling to the surface, was fury.

*How dare they. How dare they hurt those I am supposed to protect.*

*_*__*_*__*_*

**Chapter Thirty-Six: The Will of Water**

Harry only became aware of the guards following him when Snape tried to shut his office door in their faces. That caused a loud, and immediate, protest from Draco, Isabell, and Hannah Abbott. They hushed when Harry turned around and met their gazes, too. Harry suspected that his rage was shining through his eyes.

“I won’t be long,” he said softly. Whatever Snape wanted him for, it couldn’t be long. Breakfast would be over in half an hour, and then classes began, including Potions. “Stay there.”

None of them objected, though Draco stared a bit too long. Harry didn’t know why, and didn’t try to figure it out. He shut the door behind himself, and turned to see Snape placing a Pensieve on a low table Transfigured from one of the chairs that usually occupied the office. Old wariness made Harry hesitate before he walked up to it, but then he shook his head and moved forward.

“What memories does this hold?” he asked.

“The battle at Ravenclaw Tower, and what I did to stop Rovenan,” said Snape. “But, more than that, it holds the memory of a spell I sensed that night.” He paused, as if waiting for something, then made a small noise of frustration. “It is not easy to explain
outside the Pensieve. It will be easier once you have put your head into it.” He lowered his own before Harry could protest that he didn’t like Pensieves and had never seen anything attractive in them. Grumbling, Harry stepped around to the other side of the dish and followed.

He still wanted to do something about Argus Veritaserum and the person who had caused the Augurey chicks to be murdered. But perhaps this was important, too. The way Snape had sailed up to him argued that it was.

Time and space flipped around him, and then he stood in the Ravenclaw common room, a place he had visited a few times when he was helping Luna to make progress in her classes in her second year, after she’d been paralyzed for most of her first. He heard and felt magic blazing from above, foul heaviness rather like Voldemort’s wandless power in the graveyard. He forced himself to ignore it, and concentrate on the air around them, between the many staring faces and open mouths of the Ravenclaws.

“You feel it?” Snape, the present-time one standing behind him and not the one on the landing pleading with Rovenan, asked.

Harry frowned. There was a spell there, wasn’t there? Its form was odd. It was a boiling mist, foaming as if it objected to the attention of their minds. Whispers filled it. Harry cocked his ears, stripping away all the other distractions to focus on just one part of his hearing the way his mother had taught him, and heard his own name, repeated over and over and over again.

He shook his head. “Why would someone want to cast a spell that fills the room with my name repeated over and over?” he asked Snape.

Snape snarled. “That is not its purpose, Harry. I could not tell you outside the Pensieve, because I have attempted to tell several people over the past week—Minerva, you, even Lucius when he came to settle the matter of Rovenan’s parents—and the spell has eaten your memories. You understand me well enough when we’re conversing, but your attention wanders in a few moments, and then you’ve forgotten about it again. The spell is subtle, and contains its own defense mechanism.”

Harry shut his eyes, to close off the distraction of sight as well, and listened again. There was something before his name in each repetition of the spell. It was the incantation that had created it, Harry realized abruptly. After several moments of listening, he thought he had all the words.

*Converto intellegentiam de Harry Potter. Converto animadversionem ab intellegentia.*

Several possible translations of the spell flashed through his head, but Harry rejected most of them; the spell wasn’t focused on him, for one thing, which would argue against an interpretation like the incantation lowering his intelligence. He found one that fit after a few moments.

*I change the perception of Harry Potter. I change the good perception to an unfavorable one.*

Harry’s eyes blazed open. He felt the rage in him alter direction. He was still angry about Argus Veritaserum and the Augurey chicks, but those were targets truly beyond his wrath for the moment; he still didn’t know who Veritaserum was. But he knew who must have cast a spell like this, so closely allied to compulsion, so mental, so subtle rather than directly confrontational in the way that Voldemort would have gone for.

*Dumbledore.*

Harry snarled under his breath and turned to look up at Snape. “How far do you think this spell extends?” he asked, voice so furious that he barely recognized it himself. “Just through Hogwarts?”

Snape shook his head. “Lucius was able to tell me something of its nature yesterday, while he was in the Pensieve and the spell did not steal his memories of itself. I did research last night. The only thing that stops this spell, other than the power and perception of the witch or wizard who uses it, is salt water. I think we’re looking at a spell that occupies the whole of England, Scotland, and Wales.” He paused. “You have made a small net of safety in the middle of that, Harry.”

“Oh?” Harry’s thoughts roared back across the past months, taking in the attacks of the Ravenclaws and the weeping of Madam Shiverwood and the sudden madness of Auror Mallory, and casting them into a new light. “Why do you say that?”

“I do not seem to have been affected, other than losing my memories of the spell whenever I started to catch on,” said Snape. “Neither does Draco. I can imagine ways in which this spell could have twisted several of his perceptions. He would never consent to remain on the other side of that door if he was overprotective about you to the point of hindering your progress, for example. He could easily have hurt and killed the people who hurt you. But the only one he truly struck at was Whitecheek, and that happened in the midst of battle.”
Harry frowned. “But that doesn’t make sense. Why would Dumbledore want to leave the people who supported me alone? He might have a hard time changing their behavior without my thinking there was something going on, but if the spell really does protect itself, except in the Pensieve—”

“That is not what I mean,” said Snape. “You have made a career of unbinding compulsions wherever you find them, Harry. I think that you mind saw this net, or sensed it, and unbound it from those you love. Or perhaps you had already laid the protection in place.” He stepped forward and put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You told me once that you want everyone free to make their own decisions as much as possible, uninfluenced by Lords or fear or powerful magic.”

Harry could feel himself scowling. “But that means everyone. Not just people I love, or trust, or feel protective of, or however this defense truly works.”

Snape sighed. “Then I think Lucius was right, and you must be prevailed on to break the spell.”

Harry wondered how, if he would lose the memories the moment he left the Pensieve, but then dismissed the question. He would just do it from within the Pensieve, then. He would do whatever he must to snap this compulsion and give everyone their minds back.

“Did your research tell you how the spell was meant to be broken?” he asked, but wasn’t surprised when Snape shook his head.

“No. It suggested that, most of the time, it breaks when the wizard or witch powering it collapses. Most people cannot take the stretch in perceptions that it brings on, multiplying one’s eyes and emotions endlessly, until one can see through all the minds under siege if one chooses.”

“Then that means Dumbledore knows what we’ve been doing.” Harry suffered a faint tremor of unease, and then pushed it away again. Caution had its place, and it was in the planning how to break the spell, not in worry over what would happen afterwards. Now was the time for courage. “Very well, then. We’ll keep that in mind when we deal with him. Do you think he’s behind the reason that the wizarding public has been so hostile to me?”

“Very likely,” Snape agreed. “And the reason why the articles were received at all. I know the *Prophet* would normally get tired of accepting anonymous articles so frequently. The spell seems to have increased their antipathy towards you. Skeeter’s articles rarely appear anymore.”

Harry had noticed, but had assumed it was because Skeeter was getting tired of defending him. He gave an absent nod. “So part of this is false, too. I can’t depend on anchoring my unweaving of the spell on the difference between many people’s notions of true and false. They’ll consider their memories of the past few months as being as accurate and true as their memories before the spell began, and we have no way of knowing when Dumbledore began the spell, anyway.”

“Anchoring your unweaving of the spell—”

“Dumbledore’s like a spider,” Harry explained, frowning at the wide-eyed Ravenclaws in the Pensieve memory and wondering how many of them would have opposed him or thought of him at all without the spell. “He’s weaving from point to point. He can’t anchor the web on nothing, don’t you see? He chose to alter perceptions of me, not create them. He had to have some emotion in the person’s mind to work with, no matter how small it was. And now I have to have something to anchor my unweaving of the spell with. I don’t think I can just follow the pattern of his spell, because I don’t know those other minds like I know yours, or Draco’s. I might alter something that was original to them.”

“I must admit that I know very little of magic like this, Harry.” Snape’s voice was subdued. “I am an Occlumens and a Legilimens, but I work, at most, with one other mind, or with presences in someone else’s mind. I am not sure what to advise you to do with this.”

“I’ll figure it out,” said Harry darkly. He could feel the burning in him change its focus. Now it was urgency, and not merely anger. He wanted that web unbound. It was going. Its very existence was intolerable to him, since it had acted against other people’s wills and choices. “I’ll have to think it through a bit, and probably stay in the Pensieve until I do, but I’ll figure it out.”

“Can I help?”

Harry started, and turned. Argutus was crawling towards him through the memory, twisting his head in interest to look up at the scared Ravenclaws. “I have been here before, but not with so many people,” he announced, twining around Harry’s left leg, his left hip, and then his left arm. “And this feels like something out of the past. This is not a natural place, is it?” He didn’t sound
offended, but fascinated.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “You can tell the difference between the present and the past?”

Argutus cocked his head to look back at his own milk-smooth scales. “And the future. I am an Omen snake, after all.”

Harry stared hard at him, and saw colors swarming on the scales, dancing and trying to form a vision. He doubted that Argutus was old enough yet to tell him what they meant, so he waited, gazing at them and stroking Argutus’s head. Snape waited with him, probably thinking he was conversing with Argutus on matters of deepest importance and needed to be left alone.

The colors altered fitfully, fretfully, and finally slammed into a maze of scarlet and gold, as if they’d found a form that suited them. Harry squinted, but still could not tell what shape the scarlet and gold might take. The Gryffindor lion, a Gryffindor banner? Was Argutus telling him that he needed the help of the Headmistress, or perhaps his twin? Or was he just trying to say that Harry would be involved in breaking a Gryffindor’s spell?

That’s the problem with Divination, Harry reflected in frustration, thinking of Trelawney’s prophecy in his third year. Never enough details when you need them to really help with anything.

But if he could force no interpretation upon the hues, then he was at least free to let his mind roam and pick an association with them. Harry tried to slow his breathing, thinking of things that were red and gold. Gryffindor colors, leaves when they turned, fire —

Fawkes!

Harry clenched his hand, causing Argutus to hiss in displeasure as Harry quit petting him. “Argutus?” he asked, bending towards the Omen snake to give him the task before he could sulk. As long as he thought he was doing something that suited him, Argutus would bustle. “Can you get out of the Pensieve and then bring the phoenix here, without alerting anyone to what you’re doing?”

Argutus turned his head slyly sideways. “Of course I can,” he said. “No one knows as many tunnels in the stone as I do. And he is asleep in your den at this time of the morning. But I don’t know why I should. After all, you haven’t spent much time lately with me, and I don’t like the phoenix. He has the bad habit of shrinking and growing when he should stay the same size all the time.”

Harry managed a smile, in spite of everything. Argutus wanted to be coaxed. In the midst of so much strangeness, a spell that had influenced most everyone Harry knew without their even being aware of it, it was good to find at least one being who acted normally.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re the cleverest, dearest snake that ever was, Argutus. Your name means ‘clear,’ but it’s more than that. You’re a good omen all by yourself, never mind that you’re an Omen snake. Your eyes see more clearly than anyone else’s in the school. You discover all the really interesting things. But you’ve got courage, too, to survive those pain spells without a murmur of complaint, and nobody is as loyal as you are.” He felt an inspiration strike him and sink its teeth into his brain.

Argutus had been fascinated by the differences between the Houses—it was the reason he spent so much time wandering in the Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor common rooms—and had insisted on hearing as much of the history of Hogwarts as Harry thought he could understand. “In fact, you’re the perfect blend of all four Houses.”

Argutus gave a quick little hiss Harry hadn’t known he could utter; he supposed it was the closest a snake could come to a purr. “I go,” he said, and slid down from Harry’s arm in the direction of the “back” of the memory. Harry supposed he had got in in the first place by sliding over the Pensieve rim. “I cannot let you down, not when I am that cunning and clever and brave and loyal.”

He slithered off, and Snape demanded at once, “Do you really think the Omen snake can help you, Harry?”

Harry let out a little breath. “His scales showed a vision of fire. I think Fawkes can help me, yes.”

“Why?” Snape looked as if he were reconsidering ever showing Harry this. Harry knew why. Snape’s eyes had spoken it all through the conversation in which he told Harry about Rovenan, and his part in killing him. There was a new kind of protectiveness to his gaze, a new hesitancy about involving Harry in efforts to cure evil or fight spells like this one. “Are you sure you aren’t grasping at straws?”

“I might be,” Harry admitted. “Not even the prophecies of an Omen snake are clear, after all, at least until he learns to interpret them. But Fawkes is those colors he was showing, and he was Dumbledore’s phoenix. I think he knows his mind as well as anyone else alive. You said that the spell contains a large part of Dumbledore’s own perception. I hope to be able to detangle what’s him and what’s the thoughts of the people I’m fighting for that way.”
Snape’s frown was deep. “That does not sound easy.”

“It probably won’t be.” Harry kept his voice light.

“Why must you be the one to do this?” Snape whispered. “Lucius said that you would be, and he was right, damn him. But can you not rest, and hand the reins over to someone else? I might be able to solve the problem eventually, through dedicated study of Occlumency and Legilimency.”

Harry gave him an incredulous look. “What with your duties as Potions Master and Head of Slytherin and Deputy Headmaster? No, sir. And the problem would grow worse in the meantime. I know your methods. With all due respect, sir, you would spend months on this, because you wouldn’t want to do something wrong. Sometimes you simply have to say fuck caution.”

“Spoken like a Gryffindor,” said Snape, though his words lacked malice.

“Spoken like an angry vates,” said Harry. “And there’s the other part of your answer, sir. I have to do this because no one else can. Dumbledore might have the power, but he sure as fuck doesn’t have the motivation.”

“You mean you haven’t noticed that by now, sir?” Harry prowled in circles, absently avoiding the Ravenclaws, who were clutching defensively at their left arms as Snape cut their sleeves off. “Yes, it does. And I am very angry. He had no right to do this. It isn’t—it isn’t even limited to the people I’m protecting.” Harry shook his head, wondering how he could explain it. The explanation would both reassure Snape and enable Harry to put his thoughts into some kind of order, so he wanted to make the effort. “Everyone deserves that capacity to make their own choices, without being pushed in one direction or another. I know I can’t stop some of the pushing, like parents telling their children to go to bed at a certain time or else, but no one should ever have to suffer from magical coercion. And some of them will make bad choices, like following Voldemort, but that’s still what they decided on. But I can’t just force freedom on people, because what if they don’t want it? That’s why I’m almost grateful to Dumbledore for handing me this. It’s not like freeing house elves, where I’ll have to talk wizards into agreeing.” Harry grimaced slightly at the thought of what a nightmare that would be. “It’s a clear-cut situation. I’m not changing their minds, just handing them back their capacity to make their own decisions.”

“Why?” Snape whispered. Harry knew he wasn’t asking why that was a good thing—how could he, when he bore the Dark Mark on his arm and had fought so long and hard to get free of what it meant?—but why Harry was so deeply committed to this, in particular.

Harry stretched out his hand, and let a shimmer of flame run up his arm. “I’ve got all this magic. What else would I use it for?”

Snape shook his head, eyes amused, and started to reply, but just then the air around them shone with subtle fire, and Fawkes arrived on Harry’s shoulder with a croon. Argutus slithered through the common room a moment later.

“He flew ahead of me,” said Argutus. “Tell him to stop doing that.”

Harry stroked Fawkes’s wing feathers, and ignored Snape’s mutters about how the phoenix had come to be here. Harry thought Fawkes could go anywhere he wanted, and probably ignored what wizards thought of as “rules” in doing so. “I need your help,” he said softly. “Dumbledore’s extended a spell over England, Scotland, and Wales. I want to break it. It compels people to change their minds about me. The problem is that it’s hard to tell where his mind begins and their thoughts end, and we can’t do it outside the Pensieve, or we’ll lose our memories. Can you help me?”

Fawkes uttered a deep sound Harry hadn’t heard before, like the crash of falling waters. Then he rose from Harry’s shoulder, hovering just above it, so that his tail feathers and no more brushed against the side of Harry’s neck. He shut his eyes, and his song burst forth.

Harry had thought he’d heard all his friend’s songs—the mourning one, the coaxing one that told other magical creatures of the coming of a new vates, the joyous one with which he sometimes greeted sunrise, the wild one that he’d sung as he flew above the Forbidden Forest. But this was a new one. It was barely a melody, since it combined so many different sounds. Harry could hear a mutter of voices, only some of them singing. They babbled and rushed past him, and then he found himself swept up in them.

The Pensieve memory tore and whirled away. Harry had only a moment to worry about whether that would mean he would lose his memories of the spell and what he was doing with it, because he found himself dancing through flames.
Pattern after pattern took fire, nets and rounds and wheels of it, spreading in every direction. Harry stared, and began to see the threads that were there before they burned, ash-black strands of thought and emotion and memory. Fawkes’s voice ascended, and more and more of the webs exploded into white and gold and orange and blue.

No, there was only some blue, Harry realized abruptly. That was the color that expanded and throbbed on the most tangled web, the one that raced through and under everything else. Harry’s eyes narrowed, and his heart began to beat to the same harsh rhythm as those flames did.

“That’s Dumbledore’s web. Fawkes is marking it out for me, in the best way he knows how.”

He felt a sharp tug on his left arm, and looked down to see Argutus coiling there, his weight deliberate. He lifted his head and extended his tongue to taste the scent of the fire, not looking at all put out. “I don’t want to be left behind,” he explained.

Harry was not at all sure that the snake would be able to keep up in this strange neverland of fire and Pensieve memory and phoenix song, but he wouldn’t discourage him from coming, either. There had lately been enough discouragement of ambitions and choices and freedom. He rested his hand on the Omen snake and reached out towards the blue flames that marked Dumbledore’s web.

At first, he didn’t know what to do. If he put out the flames, then he might kill Dumbledore’s influence over anyone else, but he might also permanently damage Dumbledore’s mind. There was part of him that whispered that would be no bad thing. Who cared if the Light Lord was found drooling in his Still-Beetle confinement when they came to escort him to the trial?

But Harry did. He cared. He had not received Dumbledore’s permission to damage his mind. He didn’t need his permission to unbraid his influence, since that was something he had done that had hurt others. But Harry had no reason to bat him back into his own mind and wreck all that he was.

The key, as always, proved to be imagination. What Harry thought of the webs as, how he conceived them, was often as important as what he actually did to be rid of them. He closed his eyes, and located himself in Fawkes’s song, the song of falling waters.

*Water opposes fire,* said a voice so old that it seemed to be a natural truth of the world, not one that Harry had located inside himself.

He thought of water. The sea at the Northumberland beach came to him, as perhaps it always would, first of all, the endless hush of waves and the expanses of stone-gray ocean. Then he imagined the siren’s pool at Woodhouse, the lush, clear liquid, made, he was sure, to mimic the siren’s natural environment. Then it was the lake at Hogwarts, shifting and cloudy, the weeds blossoming to hide the truths of the water and the dangers within it.

Water standing became water falling, rain singing down, the smell of dampness in the dungeons that always increased when a storm was in the offing. Rain was probably falling right now; Harry had seen a tinge of gray in the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall this morning. Rain was a part of autumn, of spring, of Britain and of Ireland, drizzle and wetness and sudden heaviness in clothing and limbs.

Water falling became water flowing, braids of rivers threading all over the islands, ending in the sea, or beginning in it, if one looked at it another way, breathing out union, breathing out connection, ripple and spread and link and drowned.

Harry wound the imaginings together inside him, and then braided them up with the remnant of his anger. The Augurey’s cry signaled rain, and there were several Augurey chicks who would never cry to herald a storm, thanks to their murder by the person posing as him. Harry imagined rain falling, lonely for the black-green bird’s cry, and he imagined people daring to murder the chicks and publish the articles and believe them at all because of Dumbledore’s spell, and he pushed the water out of himself.

He opened his eyes and saw the cascades twining down the web’s burning strands, falling with imagined gravity and not against it—it was important that the image be as natural as possible—drowning the fire as it went. Fawkes’s song wound between the waters all the while, thunderous as a cascade. This was a song of justice, of stern and regretted but necessary action. Fawkes did not like getting rid of his own flames, but in this case, the flames he was getting rid of were not natural, should not have been here, should have stayed safely ensconced in Dumbledore’s head. Fire had to yield to the will of water.

Harry poured it all out of himself, and saw the strands cool and stop burning, turning to ash. He wondered what the thoughts of those under Dumbledore’s spell would feel like at the moment. Would they experience a certain lightness, wondering where the weight on their emotions had gone? Or would they think of him and not know why? Or would they feel nothing at all until the web was snapped completely?
Harry leaned forward and breathed on the fragile, ashy strands of the web, expecting them to blow apart.

Nothing happened.

Harry frowned, and glanced up at Fawkes, wondering what he should do. The phoenix uttered a confused note, then went back to singing the song of stern justice so that the ash-web couldn’t creep away and mingle with the others. But that warble was enough to confirm to Harry that the phoenix didn’t know what he should do any more than he did.

He gnawed his lip for a moment, and tried to recall what he knew of Dumbledore. He must have pushed an enormous amount of his magic into this. He would have given all he had, heart and soul and mind. That had been why Fawkes could locate his influence at all, because so much of the Headmaster himself was present.

What was the heart of Dumbledore?

And then Harry knew. His smile wasn’t happy as he stepped forward, gently shifting the weight of Argutus back to his shoulder. He didn’t really like understanding the former Headmaster any more than he had liked understanding Voldemort. But he wasn’t foolish enough to ignore his understanding, either.

The heart of Dumbledore was sacrifice.

Harry touched the stump of his left wrist to the ash-web.

He could feel the spell scream, rather than hear it, a low vibration that traveled through his body. Argutus gave a surprised hiss. “Did a tree fall?” he asked, but then became absorbed, as Harry was, in watching the web unravel.

It began from the inside and traced outward, following the general spiral shape. Numerous small strands, binding the spell’s influence to the thoughts and emotions of many different people, puffed apart and were gone, dissipating into floating clouds of black dust. Harry watched as the larger structures slumped and melted into meaninglessness, and he felt joy throbbing in his chest like a second heartbeat.

And satisfied rage, too. Strange that the ending of the web doesn’t seem to have ended my anger, Harry thought. Even stranger that I don’t want it to. I want to find out who killed those magical creatures and make them pay.

The web whirled around once and blew away. Harry laughed, and looked down as he felt Argutus lift his head and test the air with a tongue.

“Do you do that all the time?” he asked.

“Quite a bit of the time,” said Harry.

“I’m so glad that I chose you as a friend,” said Argutus happily. “That was fascinating. I can’t wait until the next time we get to do that.”

Fawkes gave an indignant warble as he settled on Harry’s shoulder, and in Harry’s mind appeared a vision of the phoenix and Harry shining with light, while Argutus lounged behind them, a dim shadow. He had helped with dismissing Dumbledore’s web, the vision said; Argutus had done absolutely nothing.

Harry stroked the phoenix and the Omen snake in turn, and then opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the Pensieve memory around them, replaying, this time somewhere near the middle of Snape’s battle with Rovenan. The second thing he saw was Snape staring at him.

There was an awe in his eyes that Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen before. Of course, he thought, Snape had never been this close to the breaking of a web, while Draco had shared the freeing of the centaurs and the unicorns and the Many with him. And if he’d seen a tenth part of what Harry and Fawkes had done, Harry couldn’t blame him for feeling awed. He was feeling rather smug and pleased himself.

“So that’s gone,” he said confidently.

Snape nodded, slowly. Then he straightened, as if thinking it remiss of a guardian to listen to what his charge said, and announced, “I rather think the Headmistress will cancel classes for today, to give people time to deal with the sudden change.”
“Good,” said Harry, with a shrug. “I think people need the recovery time. And I need to contact the Ministry, and the Daily Prophet.” If Skeeter doesn’t know who Argus Veritaserum is yet, I don’t think she would be adverse to doing a little digging to find out.

Snape smirked for no reason Harry could discern, and nodded, and then they pulled their heads out of the Pensieve memory.

Harry gasped and blinked, before realizing that he had Fawkes on one shoulder and Argutus on the other, and the memories of the spell in his mind. He gave one hard smile and strode towards the door.

“Do not try to do too much,” Snape called after him.

Harry glanced back over his shoulder. “I’m not. I’m just going to do what I need to do, and explain to certain people how very, very angry they’ve made me.” He opened Snape’s door and nodded crisply to his three guards. They all blinked at him, Draco not excepted. It seemed that they’d been expecting him to come out of Snape’s office bleeding and vomiting.

Not now. Maybe not ever again. Obviously, this is like what happened when I didn’t warn the Ravenclaws enough. People think they can push me. They’re going to find out that binding people under webs and hurting magical creatures is just not on.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ve got to go talk to the Headmistress.” He strode snappily up the corridor towards the Great Hall.

Fawkes was crooning a sunrise song on his shoulder, and Argutus was telling him what web he thought they should break next. Harry felt his heart lift higher and higher. His anger grew talons and breathed more fire on the way.

This is going to be really damn fun.

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Albus could not move. The Still-Beetle confinement would not allow him to. But he could shudder in his head as Harry snapped the spell and cast him back into the solitude of his own thoughts.

Harry had broken the web with the help of a phoenix and his own loss at Voldemort’s hands—not the help of a single, human wizard, and without a reference to either Light or Dark magic, for all that a creature of the Light had aided him.

There was a vates abroad in the world, and Albus had only one more chance to stop him.

Albus could feel the first coming of regret towering above him like a storm in the North Sea.

He knew that wave after wave, of pain and horror and loss, would follow it.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven: Make Some Noise

Draco told himself it was not childish to go a little weak in the knees at the sight of Harry as he came out of Snape’s office. His eyes were ablaze, as they tended to be in moments of high emotion, and Argutus glowed with shifting colors on his arm, and Fawkes shone on his shoulder. He was aglow with light, but not the weak kind of Light that Light wizards served and Draco’s father had often told him to beware of, lest it should trick him into servitude through false promises. This was light like lightning, like sea-fire blooming and leaping on the masts of a doomed ship.

This was light that made Harry look really damn good.

Draco followed obediently as they made their way to the Headmistress’s office, though he did wonder if Harry knew the current password. As it turned out, he didn’t need to. Fawkes lifted his voice and threw a note like an arrow at the gargoyle. The heavy creature gathered itself and shifted aside, its limbs grinding and shuffling on the stone.

Harry stepped onto the staircase, and Draco made sure he was the one who stood at Harry’s right shoulder. The Hufflepuff girl and Neelda meant well, he was sure, but neither of them was as good at spotting small threats to Harry as he was. Besides, Harry glanced back once, as if he expected to see him standing there, and Draco didn’t think he could disappoint him.

Harry’s hand found his, and squeezed.
More sure than ever that he had made the right decision, Draco hardly heard the Headmistress’s voice saying, “Come in.”

When the door opened, they found McGonagall on her feet, one hand on her head and her expression pained. That look melted the moment she saw Harry. She stood straight then, and Draco thought he saw her draw in a breath as of cleansing sea-air. She nodded at Harry.

“Well, Mr. Potter?” she asked quietly. It only occurred to Draco a moment later that she wasn’t treating Harry at all like a student.

“You’ve canceled classes for today?” Harry asked her.

McGonagall nodded. “With the chaos exploding in the Great Hall, with memories suddenly rushing back to students and professors alike and emotions shifting so suddenly, it seemed the most prudent course,” she added dryly.

“Dumbledore was spreading a web,” said Harry, without bothering to introduce the subject. Draco hissed a bit at the thought that Harry had broken another web and he hadn’t been there to see it, but Harry’s hand found and squeezed his again, which somewhat helped to make up for the disappointment. “It was a powerful, old Light spell, which subtly influenced people against me and ate the memories of those who discovered it. Of course there’s no way to tell immediately which actions people took against me were influenced by that, and to what degree. But I think canceling classes for today is a good first step. It gives people some time to recover and think about what they feel.”

McGonagall closed her eyes and thinned her lips. “And another shame falls to the House of Gryffindor,” she said softly. “I am sorry, Harry. Godric’s children have not done very well by you.”

Draco looked down to conceal a smile. He could see advantages in this shame of Gryffindor’s, though he doubted Harry would see the same thing. Draco had not been blind to the fact that Slytherin House was gaining in prominence, that people—save those students against Harry—tended not to make as many jokes about them or assume they were evil automatically, as they had last year. Their rival House being willing to hide its head about now was another point in their favor.

“You didn’t have anything to do with it, Headmistress McGonagall,” said Harry dismissively, which rather wasn’t paying attention to politics, in Draco’s mind. “It does mean that I need to contact the Minister, and inform him of the spell, and get him to reason out which of his actions towards me in the last little while were prompted by the spell, and which were genuine. It’ll affect publicity, the trial procedures, the members of the Wizengamot they might choose to judge the trial—all that.” Harry shrugged as if none of it mattered more than any other part. Draco thought he was the only one in the room who knew him well enough to see how his shoulders trembled at the mention of the trial. “I’ll have to talk to other people too, of course, but the Minister first. I need to ask your permission to be absent from the school today, at least, and perhaps for several days, and I need to know how far you’re willing to back me on opposing the Minister, if that’s what I need to do.”

“I believe you entirely, Harry,” said McGonagall at once, which earned her a few points in Draco’s eyes. “Creating a lie like this isn’t in your character. If you need my help with Minister Scrimgeour, you shall have it.”

Harry’s eyes closed for a moment. Draco wasn’t facing him, but he knew they did it anyway, by the crinkles in the side of his face. He felt a moment’s smugness in being that familiar with Harry, and then an even greater smugness at the thought that Harry was his, all his.

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Harry breathed. “And I’m afraid I need to borrow two of your professors for my journey to the Ministry. I’d like both Professor Snape and Professor Lupin to escort me.”

“Is Professor Lupin a wise choice, Harry?” McGonagall asked gently. “It is true that I nearly dared the Minister to oppose me by giving him a job here, but Hogwarts is distant from the Ministry, and Scrimgeour is less concerned with me than Fudge was with—Dumbledore. Bringing a werewolf into Scrimgeour’s own territory may strain your relationship.”

“If it can be strained that easily, then I don’t want to preserve it intact,” said Harry. “Besides, bringing along a former Death Eater is risky, too. I want to show the Minister that I don’t intend to back down and be as calm and tame as I have been so far.”

Draco frowned. When has Harry ever been tame or calm? But he had refrained from much political prodding into the Ministry in the last few months. Perhaps that was what he meant.

“I think Professor Lupin is still in the Great Hall, calming students,” said McGonagall quietly. “Would you like me to go get him, Harry, or would you prefer to go yourself?”

Harry took a deep breath. “I want to go myself.”
McGonagall gave him a fierce, appreciative smile. “Then I wish you good luck, Harry,” she said, and sat back down behind her desk.

Draco again managed to be right at Harry’s shoulder as they entered the moving staircase, and he murmured in his ear, “I hope that you don’t think you can leave me behind. We’re going to the Ministry together.”

Harry tilted his head back; they stood so close that he could let it rest on Draco’s shoulder. Draco lost his breath at the feeling of Harry’s hair on his cheek.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Harry said.

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I am angry, and I have a right to be angry.

That was the sentiment Harry kept repeating to himself, and it stood him in good stead as he strode back into the Great Hall. Professor Lupin and Professor Flitwick were near the front of the room, speaking softly with several overexcited students. They didn’t see him as soon as the students themselves did.

Harry saw their faces tighten in shock. Several of them looked away from him. Those would be people who had figured out some difference in their thoughts about him, Harry thought. Others simply stared, as if they knew that something was different but didn’t know what or why. A wake of whispers ran behind him as he marched towards the Professors.

It wasn’t their fault, said part of Harry’s mind, the older and more familiar part. It was the spell.

But with most of his fury escaped, it was impossible to put the rest of it away so easily. It snarled in his ears, and reminded him of what Margaret had done to Argutus, what Marietta had done to him with the encouragement of her Death Eater boyfriend—though probably not with the knowledge that he was a Death Eater—and what Rovenan had done. Harry knew Dumbledore’s spell had seized and worked on what small feelings their minds might have harbored towards him, blowing up tiny clouds into great storms.

But those feelings were still there in the first place. Margaret hated me for something that happened in second year. Marietta hated me—because, apparently. Rovenan still became a Death Eater, and I don’t think I was the only reason why.

Harry felt himself tense when he was a few feet away from Lupin and someone stepped up behind him. He heard Draco drawing his wand, but he didn’t get a chance to say anything before the person said, “Dolor immoderatus.”

Harry didn’t recognize the voice, but he recognized the pain curse she was casting—probably at Isabell or Hannah—and he swung around and lifted his hand. His fury and his magic, both roused, rose together with a spat note from Fawkes, and turned her curse in mid-flight, changing it into a red spell that bounced back at her like a dagger. The caster, Lucy Turtledove, Margaret’s friend, shrieked, and put one hand to her face. Harry saw her skin cracking and flushing, as if she had a bad sunburn. It spread from her cheeks to her chin, and Lucy yelped and dropped a hand when she touched her cheek, flinching, as if the intense heat were too much for her to bear.

Satisfaction as hot as the burn licked along Harry’s spine like flames. He knew his lips had twisted into a smile, but he didn’t know what it looked like, save that Lucy stared at him and as quickly glanced away.

“I broke a web that was spread over you,” he said, raising his voice so that everyone could hear him. “Albus Dumbledore cast a spell that worked on your emotions and tried to compel you to hinder me. I thought that your hatred would cease with the web’s removal.” He fastened his eyes on Lucy. “It seems that I was wrong, and that some of you are not that intelligent.”

Lucy was staring at him again, one hand clenched so tightly around her wand that Harry thought she would break it. That would be something to see. Her eyes glowed with hatred. “You’re lying,” she whispered. “Headmaster Dumbledore would never do that. You’re lying.”

“I am not,” said Harry. “And even if I was, you have no excuse for trying to attack other students. Didn’t Rovenan teach you anything?” His gaze went to her covered left arm. “Do you have something to hide, Turtledove?” he added, and made sure that his voice dripped false solicitude.

She seemed to choke. “How dare you—how dare you imply—“
“If you don’t have anything to hide, then you should have no trouble showing your arm.” Harry moved a step forward, knowing that he had turned the mood of the room against her, and that she would be stinging with embarrassment, and that he was enjoying this, much as he told himself he shouldn’t. “Bare it for me.”

“Why should I?” Lucy’s chin went up. “You’re a liar, I know you are, a Dark wizard, one who doesn’t have any reason to tell the truth and just likes to show up those who are performing a useful service to the school!” She nodded to Margaret Parsons, who was lurking behind her, but avoided Harry’s eyes when he tried to catch hers. “You cursed Margaret with a humiliating spell, and you’ve—”

“Received permission to defend himself with magic, as you should know full well, Miss Turtledove,” said Remus, appearing beside them like a wraith, as graceful and as silent. Flitwick was behind him, his face reflecting deep disapproval as he gazed at the students of his House confronting Harry.

“Fifty points from Ravenclaw,” Remus continued, his amber eyes dangerous. “You owe Mr. Potter at least the courtesy of listening to the truth.” He ignored Lucy’s spluttering entirely and turned to Harry. “Was there something you needed, Harry?”

Since he could hear Flitwick scolding Lucy, Harry felt secure enough in himself to nod. “Yes. I want you to come with me to the Ministry. I’ve got to tell Minister Scrimgeour about the spell.” He held Remus’s eyes. “You’ll be going with Professor Snape, because I thought you were the best choice.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll meet you by the front doors in a half-hour, then,” said Remus, and turned to look at Lucy again. “It could be sooner, I know,” he added, anticipating Harry’s words long before he gave them, “but I have something to deal with here, first.”

Harry worried that Remus would hurt her, with the rational part of him. The angry part of him chuckled and let him turn, to march out between two lines of students trying very hard not to stare at him, and go fetch Snape.

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Rufus Scrimgeour was not having a very good day.

There had been the sourness in the back of his throat when he read the Daily Prophet article this morning, and saw Potter smashing Augurey chicks over the head. He could not believe it, but more than the literal truth of the article, what it portended made him close his eyes and swallow.

There was fear abroad in the wizarding world, and hatred, of a child with Lord-level power.

Rufus had been three years behind Tom Riddle in Hogwarts. He had seen what happened to a boy like that who was revered by some, but hated by just as many. Riddle had split Slytherin down the middle, some of them clinging to him and some turning away, and some of those who turned away had received—strange wounds. No one could prove Riddle had done it, but on the other hand, no one else came forward to claim credit for the dangerous pranks, either. Rufus had kept his head down, his vow to the Light at the age of twelve largely protecting him. Riddle had ignored him in contempt, and most of the others thought he was too odd to bother with.

And now there was another child who had power as strong as Riddle’s—or stronger, really, than they had been at comparable ages, though Rufus was not at all sure who would be more powerful once Potter had grown to manhood—and people hating him. Harry could so easily do as Riddle did, turning in on himself in the face of that loathing. It would be worse for him, Rufus knew, because Harry would not understand it the way Riddle had. That first Lord had handled it with a raised brow and a sneer. Harry tried to make things better for those who hated him.

Sooner or later, though, forgiveness and good will had to run out. Sooner or later, they could wind up with another Slytherin Lord who chose to embrace Dark Arts, so that respect would at least mingle with the hatred.

And there was the suspicion, niggling and whispering in the back of Rufus’s head, that Harry might one day decide to turn his sights on the Ministry, that his silence so far was ominous, that he should have been in contact and badgering Rufus to do something about the werewolf laws by now. What if he was gathering power in an attempt to take the Ministry over? What if he did manage to destroy the refuge of ordinary wizards after all?
Rufus wearily rubbed his forehead. He couldn’t remember how long he’d had those suspicions. Since July, he thought.

And then, as he sipped his tea and contemplated the Argus Veritaserum articles he’d saved and wished his respect for the right of the Daily Prophet’s reporters to say whatever the hell they wanted would yield just enough to allow him to arrest Veritaserum—sometimes, it was a problem having morals—everything changed.

Rufus spilled his tea, which was never calculated to put him in a good mood. He stood up, wand whipping into his hand, and glanced around the office. He frowned. There had been a sparkling mist over everything a moment ago, and now it was gone.

Wasn’t it?

But why was there a sparkling mist in my office in the first place?

Rufus strode rapidly to the door and threw it open. Young Tonks was the guard on the office this morning. Of course, she started and tripped over her robes, sprawling full-length on the floor.

Waiting for her to recover, Rufus stared in several directions and even sniffed. Come to think of it, a faint smell he had got used to was gone, too. It had been the smell of rotten eggs. But why should he have got used to that? Surely not even the most incompetent of Auror trainees would have to wear the hex that made them smell like that for more than a week. Smelling like rotten eggs was an excellent incentive to master the correct spells.

“What is it, sir?” Tonks squeaked, popping back up again.

“I want to speak to—” Damn. Not Mallory. Rufus still had to pause and remember that his most trusted second-in-command had disgraced herself, sometimes. “Auror Burke. Right now.”

Tonks simply ran off, not even pausing for a “Yes, sir!” Hopefully that would help make up for the several times she tripped on the way. Rufus shut his door and returned to his desk.

His glance fell on the Veritaserum article about the Augureys, and he read a few lines. He frowned. Who would believe this drivel? It was still a cause for concern since it spoke of the attitude some people held towards Potter, of course, but suddenly it seemed much less compelling than it had been.

Someone cast a spell on me.

Rufus tapped his wand against his palm, speeding up as he began to pace back and forth, only slightly favoring his bad leg. He could think of only a few wizards who would have the skill to get such a spell past his complicated, layered wards on the office, and most of them were either in Tullianum or running around with Voldemort. Of course, Rufus couldn’t discount that the Dark Lord might want to hex him, but such a subtle spell wasn’t really his style. Voldemort liked to announce his presence. Besides, wouldn’t he have had the spell do something else? Command Rufus to become a Death Eater and take the Dark Mark, for example?

What was the spell meant to make me do?

It was an unanswerable question for right now, and Rufus tucked it away. He went back to numbering down candidates who could have done this kind of thing.

There was Dumbledore. He certainly had the raw power, but he was in Still-Beetle confinement. One couldn’t use magic through Still-Beetle confinement. Of course, one couldn’t cast magic on Dumbledore, either, but that was all right. The beetles would make sure that he was still alive, his body preserved as it had been at the moment the shell was thrown. He could remain locked up neat and tight until they were ready to try him.

And there was Potter.

Rufus scowled. His suspicions about Potter wanting to take over the Ministry no longer seemed quite as potent as they had been, either. On the other hand, if Potter didn’t answer an owl, then Rufus thought he would be justified in suspecting him. He went to his desk and sat down, intending to write a polite letter.

He was halfway through the first paragraph when the door opened, and Auror Burke came in. Rufus sat back, linking his hands behind his head and studying her. Burke was a Dark family, almost all of them, though some of the bastards had the decency to stay neutral. Auror Priscilla Burke was one of those. She hadn’t Declared, though her husband had. She was fiercely, yet quietly,
independent. She got things done. Rufus had chosen her because he trusted her to look out for her own interests, and to have the cool-headedness that Fiona Mallory lacked. If she ever became involved in a case that targeted one of her family, for instance, she would hand the reins over to someone else. Fiona hadn’t been able to keep away from the Potters, and look where it got her.

“Sir,” said Burke, sitting down in the chair opposite his desk and inclining her head cordially. She was tall for a woman, and could look him directly in the eye. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes,” said Rufus. “Did you feel a change in your thoughts about ten minutes ago?”

Burke’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “I noticed something,” she said. “The air around me felt lighter, and I remembered a few things I’d forgotten from the past months, about times I suspected I was under a spell. But I couldn’t see any visible effects. Besides, none of the wards on my office rang. Do you think that there really was a spell, sir?”

“I’m positive,” said Rufus. “And the wizards who could cast a spell able to get in under our wards are rare, as I’m sure you know.”

Burke nodded. Her face had gone pale. Rufus cocked his head. Her husband is Potter’s ally, but I had thought she’d kept distant enough from the war to keep her job here. Perhaps not.

“Were you exempt from the spell because you are Potter’s ally?” he asked quietly.

“Sir, I—I really don’t know.” Burke shook her head and gave him what he thought was an honest, if anguished, look. “I don’t think he would do something like that. He’s vates, about freeing the magical creatures. I don’t think he’d enslave wizards to do it. From what I understand, he can’t, or he loses everything he’s become.”

Rufus jerked his head in a short movement neither nod nor shake. Yes, he’d heard that too, but Merlin knew that Potter had enough power to be a Lord, and Merlin knew no wizard was immune to temptation. Rufus could see Potter Declaring himself a Lord out of genuine desire to do good, forgetting that wizards and witches who did not have his extraordinary magic were people, too.

“I would like you to go through the Department,” he said. “Quietly. Find out who seems to have recovered from this spell, who remembers nothing, and who still might be under it.”

Burke was just nodding when his door flew open. Rufus lifted his head and narrowed his eyes when he saw Tonks standing there. “Nymphadora,” he said, to show how displeased he was. “What is it?”

“It’s Mallory, sir,” said Tonks, gulping several times. “She’s broken free of her confinement. She insists now that she wasn’t angry at the Potter parents, and she doesn’t know why she let herself be arrested. She says that she was manipulated, her emotions exaggerated.”

Rufus cursed softly. If that is the effect of the damn spell, we have more of a problem on our hands than we imagined.

But Fiona’s escape was a bigger one. Rufus knew she was the strongest wizard in the Ministry right now, excepting the confined Albus Dumbledore. And if she’d decided to forego rationality enough to break the wards on her cell, then she might well use her wandless magic to kill.

“Tell me where she is,” he ordered Tonks, drawing his wand.

“Sir, you can’t—”

“I’m the only one who has a chance of getting through to her,” said Rufus. “Tell me now, damnit.”

Tonks bowed her head. “Second floor, sir. Just past the lifts.”

Rufus nodded, and lifted the thread hanging around his neck, which held several small ordinary objects, made into Portkeys, one for each floor of the Ministry. They were the only ones that worked in the confines of the building all the time, without special dispensation. He grasped the one for the second floor, and felt the familiar dizzying whirl grab him and then deposit him in the middle of the Auror office.

Most of his Aurors were missing from their desks. Rufus could hear a silence from up the corridor, which was worse than the sounds of battle. More to the point, he could feel Fiona’s magic in the air. The walls and floor shimmered with heat. Rufus
winced. He’d been one of the first Aurors on the scene after Fiona had killed her abusive father when she was sixteen. The man had been covered with burns so deep he hadn’t been recognizable as human.

“Steady does it,” he muttered, in encouragement to himself, and started forward.

He made it through half the desks before he caught a glimpse of movement under one. He dropped at once to a battle-crouch, wincing as his bad leg pained him. He caught a glimpse of a startled face, and then red hair.

“Weasley,” he said, nodding to Percy. “Do you know where Mallory is?”

Weasley shuddered, but he had a hold of his wand, and Rufus knew he’d been hiding as part of a strategy, not out of fear. “Still in the second-floor corridor, sir,” he said. “She tried the lifts, but Madam Bones had already cast a spell to make them refuse to carry her. She was screaming about finding Albus Dumbledore and making him pay for this.”

Rufus sighed. *So there’s no doubt about who she blames it on, at least.* “Come with me, Weasley,” he ordered, and had the satisfaction of hearing Percy fall in behind him as he threaded his way through the desks. He’d known he had potential Auror material in that one from the first time he looked into his eyes. Potter had done him a favor there, identifying Weasley as one of the spies Dumbledore was trying to plant in the Ministry and warning Rufus about it. Rufus had taken the opportunity to snare the younger man’s loyalty for himself. No sense in wasting someone who could do the Ministry so much good.

They rounded the corner that led out of the office, and the heat immediately grew stronger. Rufus gripped his wand, and stepped out into the middle of the hallway.

He nearly stepped on Auror Feverfew, lying motionless on the ground. Rufus estimated his state of health with one glance, and relaxed when he saw that the young man still breathed. His burns were bad, though, at least second-degree. Rufus shook his head, and felt his mouth harden into a thin, determined line. This was why he didn’t like powerful wizards and witches. They were apt to let their magic rule them, and think they had the right to do anything they wanted just because of what they *could* do.

Well, Fiona was about to learn better.

A few more steps, and he saw her, standing in front of the lifts and attacking them with blast after blast of wandless magic. She hadn’t noticed them coming, but then Weasley stepped heavily, and she whipped towards them. She went quite still when she caught sight of Rufus.

Rufus made a quick decision. Fiona’s eyes were crazed, her own skin blistering and crackling with the force of the raw magic that bled from her. He had been about to try reason, to persuade her that she was a principled Auror and didn’t need to do this, but he knew now she wouldn’t listen.

“Calx de Achilles,” he murmured, a spell that he didn’t use often, a spell as near the Dark Arts as he would let himself get. When it was a choice between Fiona hitting him and Weasley and this spell, though, the Achilles’ Heel Curse would win out every time.

The spell lashed, seeking and finding Fiona’s weak point. It would have been easily defeated if she had shields, but she didn’t; she was too far gone in rage to have them.

Her eyes widened, and she made a little moaning noise as one of her worst memories welled up and overwhelmed her. Then she slumped to the floor, unconscious. Rufus quickly shot binding ropes from his wand, tying her wrists and ankles together and forcing her to lie still.

He left Weasley to fetch a Healer for Feverfew and cart Fiona back to the cells, advising him to work with several other Aurors to set up stronger wards this time, and then went back to his office. Potter was indeed going to have some explaining to do.

He was gratified when Tonks informed him that Potter had already arrived. He smiled grimly and stepped into the office, seeing the boy waiting with Severus Snape, the young Malfoy boy, and a man who was obviously a werewolf.

*Does he want to issue a challenge? Then I’ll meet it.*

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Harry turned his head as Scrimgeour stalked into the office. He had often thought the Minister was like an old lion, but that was never truer than now. His yellow eyes all but glowed, and he had a deep purr to his voice as he spoke—though not the kind of purr a cat would give on being stroked.
“Potter. My Ministry has gone quite mad this morning, and I think I am relieved of a spell I don’t remembering being under. I trust that you can shed some light on this?”

Harry smiled slightly. He knew it wasn’t a pleasant smile. He didn’t mean it to be. He had seen the look on Scrimgeour’s face when he saw Remus, and the flicker of discomfort and disdain that passed over his features when he identified him as a werewolf.

That is going to be our next battle, isn’t it, Minister? That is, if you don’t convince yourself that I did Dumbledore’s dirty work.

“I know about the spell,” he said. “It’s Dumbledore’s. He cast a web of compulsion across Britain that made people think as unfavorably of me as possible. I would wager that you probably thought I was set to muck about in the Ministry. I’m not. I broke the compulsion, and I’m here to let you know about it. I have no idea how long it will take your people to recover, or what lasting damage they might have from this spell. I do think that you should move Dumbledore to an isolated cell in Tullianum until his trial, so that no one else has a chance to get to him.”

Scrimgeour’s eyes became slits, and he walked behind his desk before he spoke again. Harry felt Draco’s hand on his shoulder. He moved back into the support, but didn’t lean back, though the grip invited him to. He couldn’t afford to look weak in the Minister’s eyes right now.

“No one can cast magic through Still-Beetle confinement,” said Scrimgeour. “Not even a Light Lord.”

“Someone raised it, then,” said Harry.

Scrimgeour jerked like a fish on a line. “Impossible. I looked over the Aurors myself, and purged them of anyone who might even have been tempted to free Dumbledore. Besides, why wouldn’t he have cast more powerful magic if he did have the chance to?”

“Because he prefers subtle spells.” Harry moved a step forward. Draco and Snape and Remus all moved with him. He was amused at that, but he kept his amusement off his face. It would only to do to let Scrimgeour see hardness in his eyes right now.

“He wanted the chance to make it seem as if the wizarding world itself had decided he was innocent. That was the only way to retain his old reputation and his old power. And as for purging your Aurors—well, Minister, Auror Mallory tortured my parents. I think you should look over the ranks again.”

Scrimgeour’s nostrils flared just slightly. Then he said, “You’ve informed me of the spell, Potter. I believe you, provisionally. It doesn’t sound as though you would cast the kind of spell that made hatred of you possible. But if that’s all you want, why march up to me with this phalanx?” He moved his head to indicate Snape, Remus, and even Draco. Harry supposed that Draco’s narrow-eyed protective look might have something to do with it.

“Because I have a guard everywhere I go, these days,” said Harry, fighting the temptation to roll his eyes. “Because there were Death Eaters in Hogwarts.” He drew in a deep breath. He hadn’t recited his final purpose to any of the three coming with him. So far as they were concerned, this was mostly a journey to let the Minister know what was what, and just where he stood in relation to the structure of political power in wizarding Britain. But Harry did have something else in mind, and he would say it now.

“And because I want you to see that I’m serious about my goals. All of them. I will use my power, though I won’t compel people. That means that you’re going to have a challenge on the werewolf laws, Minister.”

Scrimgeour just nodded. Remus, though, shook at Harry’s side as though he’d heard a wolf howl.

“And it means that you’re going to have to move my parents’ trial date,” said Harry, getting out the sentence all at once.

Draco’s hand tightened on his shoulder, and Snape snarled. Remus growled, a more frightening sound. Scrimgeour raised an eyebrow. “Why?” he asked.

“Because the atmosphere’s been poisoned, now,” said Harry. “Do you have to ask? Some people hate me, some people love me, and that’ll include members of the Wizengamot. There is no way that my parents will get a fair trial. Shift the date to a time when more people know about the spell and have a chance to recover from its effects. December should work, I think.”

Scrimgeour studied him in silence. That gave Draco the chance to learn forward and whisper into Harry’s ear, “Are you insane? You’re already stressed about this, and you want to move the trial back further, and put yourself under more stress?”

“It’s not about me,” Harry snapped back at him. “It’s about applying the principles of justice fairly and evenly.”

“I agree with Mr. Malfoy.”
Harry’s heart stopped. He had never thought he would hear Scrimgeour say something like that—either agreeing with a Malfoy, or going against his own principles. He turned his head back slowly, inch by inch, and stared hard at the Minister, who didn’t stir.

“But, sir,” said Harry, fighting the urge to cry out, “you don’t know yourself when your own feelings towards me changed. You’ll have to wait until the spell breaks completely. You—"

“Did you, or did you not, break the web of the spell, Mr. Potter?” Scrimgeour asked. “Are you, or are you not, vates?”

“It’s gone,” Harry whispered.

Scrimgeour nodded sharply. “Then I will advise the Wizengamot to clear their minds as much as possible in the three weeks we have remaining. Speak with mediwizards if they need to, or a skilled Occlumens. They will be ready by the time the trial comes, Potter.” His face darkened for a moment. “Dumbledore’s trial will be the problem. I am glad that will not be until March.”

“I would prefer this not happen, sir,” Harry said steadily.

“The evidence came in before Dumbledore could possibly have cast the spell, since he wasn’t in confinement then,” Scrimgeour countered. “The Pensieve memories are still fact. They will still serve as evidence during the trial.”

Harry ducked his head and said nothing. He could feel the anger burning, the temptation to just lash out and change things, but he would not. There were some things even his magic and his temper would not allow him to do.

Draco’s hand stroked softly at his shoulder, and pulled him back to himself, reminding him what things he still had to be angry about. “Minister, do you know who Argus Veritaserum is?”

Scrimgeour shook his head. “I was trying to find that out myself.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Then I think I have nothing further to say to you, unless you want to say something to me?”

Scrimgeour shook his head again. Harry nodded back once, and then turned and ducked out of the office.

Snape hissed at once, “Harry, what were you thinking? To get your parents’ trial pushed back—"

“I want them to have every chance,” said Harry, staring straight ahead. His hand was clutching the quill-shaped amulet he would use to call Skeeter. He would set her digging to find out who Argus Veritaserum was, and who had murdered the Augurey chicks. That was a good thing, a thing he could be angry about without more complicated emotions in the background.

Remus said softly, “Harry, what Lily and James did to you was wrong.”

Not this again. Harry turned on them, and the look in his eyes was evidently enough to silence them. Draco was the only one who didn’t draw back, but stared at him with a slightly open mouth. Harry ignored that. Perhaps he was too stunned by the sudden movement to know how to react otherwise.

“I know that,” he said. “I accept that the trial date won’t be moved. Everything is fine. Now, come on. I want to set Skeeter on Veritaserum’s trail before the day is much older—"

He marched off, ignoring the rest of what Remus and Snape said. No point in getting angry about things he couldn’t change.

He could find out who was impersonating him, though, and get to the bottom of that. And when he did…

The anger burned like fine wine in the bottom of his belly, like a promise on the lips of an enemy. Yes. I think I will enjoy that even more.

_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

Intermission: Breathing In the Moments Between

Harry stood in front of the grass that Occluded his scar link to Voldemort, and felt the pain streaming from beyond it.

Voldemort was doing—something. Harry could feel him exulting sometimes, or growing angry, or weaving magic in dense spells that seemed to center on the sort of elaborate preparations a ritual might require. But he felt all those sensations only in the first...
moments they occurred. They all wound up ebbing into pain.

He could see what was happening, if he removed the grass.

Harry closed his eyes and clenched down on the temptation to do so. He could feel Fawkes’s warm bond pulsing in the back of his mind, but the phoenix was asleep, and not sharing this—this odd thing, whatever it was, this mixture of dream and vision. Fawkes couldn’t stop him if he did choose to go down the scar link and look at the thoughts currently occupying Voldemort’s mind.

But if he did that, he stood a good chance of pulling Draco along with him.

And if he didn’t, there was the chance that Voldemort might go right on draining Muggleborn children of their magic, or torturing his victims, or preparing a Dark spell to make himself immortal. Harry didn’t think any of those things beyond Voldemort. He rubbed his hand over his left wrist.

He had to stop Voldemort. It was his duty to stop Voldemort.

But in doing so, he would endanger Draco. And he was sure that Draco and Snape and the others would say that he was endangering himself, and the war effort.

He shifted back and forth in front of the grass, restlessly. All his rage couldn’t help him now. It just urged him to charge forward, damn and forget the consequences. He stood there, irresolute, and the irresolution tore and tugged at him, shredding his guts and going straight for his heart. It wasn’t quite as painful as the Entrail-Expelling Curse, but now that he’d felt that, Harry had something to compare this to.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him. Surprised, Harry blinked and woke. His vision hadn’t been intense enough to disturb Draco’s sleep, had it? Now, that he really wouldn’t forgive himself for.

He called his glasses to him with a wandless, wordless spell, and slid them on his face, peering up. Yes, it was Draco who woke him, but his face was anxious, worried, not angry. Harry frowned.

Did something happen while I was asleep?

“Draco?” he asked. “Your parents? Are they all right?”

Draco’s face flickered into confusion, and he shook his head. “Yes, of course, they’re fine,” he said. Then his eyes widened, and he said, “Ah. Yes. You thought I woke you up because I had bad news?” He pushed at Harry’s shoulder until he moved over, and then sat down on the bed.

“Well, yes,” said Harry. “If you were angry, I thought you would have started scolding me, but the worry—”

“I’m glad you didn’t remove the barrier,” said Draco. His arm snaked around Harry’s shoulders, and he tugged him close against his side.

“Is for you, you prat,” said Draco softly, and kissed him on the temple. “I woke up to get a glass of water and heard you whimpering. Are you all right?”

Harry considered not discussing it. But this had nothing to do with his feelings for his parents, which he did still prefer to keep to himself, and he didn’t want to lie to Draco about it. He couldn’t pretend that he’d been sleeping peacefully, so he told the truth.

“I can feel Voldemort moving. Doing—something. I knew I could get more details if I just removed the barrier Snape helped me put over the connection we have. But I knew I might also hurt you if I did that.” Harry gave a helpless little hiss, his rage coming to mean more now that he was out of the dream. “I hate being indecisive.”

“I’m glad you didn’t remove the barrier,” said Draco. His arm snaked around Harry’s shoulders, and he tugged him close against his side.

“Yes, I knew you’d say that,” said Harry, his words muffled by the cloth of Draco’s shirt. “My life is more important to you than seeing Voldemort defeated.”

“Yes. It is.” Draco’s voice made that not a banal fact, but a whole new truth. “You are more important to me than this war, Harry, and your life is more important than any knowledge. Without you, we fall.” He gently touched Harry’s hair. Harry couldn’t even tell with what, his lips or his fingers, so light was the gesture. “You need to stay alive for the rest of us, if you won’t stay alive for your own sake.”

Harry gave another uncomfortable wriggle. Normally, he could have tolerated more contact than this, but Draco’s intent focus on
him made it unnerving. Draco let him pull away, but gripped his face and held it still as he looked into his eyes.

“Do you believe me?”

“I believe you,” said Harry. It was impossible to doubt Draco believing it, and that was really what was at stake here. How Harry valued his own life wasn’t that important.

“Good. Now lie down and go to sleep, and don’t worry about this any more. You have so many people who love you, Harry, who are willing to stand behind you.” Draco curled up on the bed in a clear sign that he didn’t intend to leave and go back to his own.

Harry lay down a short distance from him to soothe his own jangled nerves, just barely able to tolerate Draco’s arm as it draped over his shoulder. Now, though, he had something else to worry about, his mind singing Draco’s words.

Do my allies really follow me, and not my ideals? If I died, would the alliance dissolve and no one try to follow Connor or anyone else who might carry on the fight against Voldemort?

I don’t want that to be true. It was true for Dumbledore. I don’t want it to be true for me. One person shouldn’t be more important than the whole of this battle. If I die, they have to keep fighting.

How do I make them see that?

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The way to make them see that was not, manifestly, to be the goal of a hive of the Many the next morning, as they rolled into the Great Hall in their usual writhing mass and made straight for the Slytherin table.

Some of the Slytherins, who should know better, were looking nervous. Harry rolled his eyes and stooped, holding out his right arm. Luckily, Fawkes had decided to stay in the bedroom this morning, and Argutus was out exploring the school, so there was no one to object as the Many traveled smoothly up the offered limb and over his body. Harry felt a sense of relaxation pervade him that he hadn’t experienced in a month, since the battle on the beach and the last time he’d had the Many swarming and draped on him. With so many small snakes around him, snakes who were formally allied to him and whose poison could kill or permanently blind someone else, he felt safe. None of the Ravenclaws, or anyone else, would dare attack him now.

“We want to give you one of our children,” said the hive.

Harry frowned. By the tone of their voices and the fact that they hadn’t cared about the staring eyes and screams they got as they roamed through the Great Hall, this was the younger hive, the one he’d actually seen hatched in the Forbidden Forest and freed from their web. He hadn’t thought they were old enough to lay eggs and have children of their own yet. Granted, the life cycle of South African hive cobras was one of the expanse of things he was no expert in. “You have young already?”

“No. Children is what we call a member of the hive who is eyes and fangs and nothing else,” said the ebbing voices. One of the cobras draped around Harry’s arm moved, and then slithered up his body to his face, the others rolling smoothly back to make room for it. No, her, Harry supposed, noting the subtle waver in the golden ripples that supposedly indicated that this snake could lay eggs. “She cannot hold the collective mind. She will serve as eyes for us when we must see you, though. And she will attack at any moment you command her.”

“Bite someone to death,” said Harry flatly, “or blind them.” The small snake was locked around his neck. She didn’t sway like the others. She simply remained tucked down, under his chin, and held him in a tight clutch that didn’t feel tight. Harry reached up, and could barely tell where her scales left off and his skin began.

“Yes. You are in danger. We do not want to lose our benefactor. And our child does not need to eat or sleep. She will guard you day and night.”

Harry ran a finger over her tail. “And I can’t refuse the gift?”

“You would die,” said the Many simply. “There are enemies everywhere. We have met with our little brother, the snake you gave the name in the tongue of wizards. He told you about the attacks on you, on him, on everything and everyone dear to you. The vates may die of age or in breaking a web or in fighting the mighty wizards, but he will not die because of a shot spell from an enemy he should not care about. She is here to defend you from those you trust too much, those who creep up on you.”

Harry nodded in resignation. With the constant attacks from the Ravenclaws, he could hardly say that he had no need for such a
gift, though he was still somewhat disturbed by it. He had assumed that all members of a hive of the Many were equal, that there weren’t empty vessels. It seemed that he’d been wrong, and would just have to accept that.

*In a way, it’s good. There is more wonder in them than I ever guessed. They’re not bound by human ideals, and why should they be?*

“Thank you,” he said.

The Many writhed, doing a graceful dance to accept the gratitude, for all Harry knew, and then slid down and away, tumbling across the Great Hall and towards the door.

Harry just shook his head when Draco arched an eyebrow, and sat down between him and George Weasley, his guards for the moment. “The magical creatures have decided I should be guarded, too,” he muttered. “I’m going to have no privacy.”

“Why, Harry.” George leaned towards him and leered. “Why would you want to have some privacy? Got some things to do that you don’t want to show anyone, do you?” His eyes flicked towards Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes and ignored Draco’s glare and his own threatening blush. “Shut it,” he said, and stood, testing the slight weight of the snake around his throat. It was very light, to tell the truth. She either wasn’t wrapped tightly enough to constrict his breathing, or knew how to shift when she might have done so. “Let’s get to class.”

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“Miss Turtledove.”

Remus wondered what he had to thank for the way Lucy Turtledove froze and squeaked when she heard his voice—his being a werewolf, or the fact that he’d assigned the Ravenclaw girl two weeks of detention with Filch the last time she threatened Harry. Probably the first, from the way she turned and stared at his teeth. Besides, if the punishment had made that much of an impact on her, she wouldn’t have been creeping along behind Harry and his guards on their way to Defense Against the Dark Arts, trying to take an opportunity for a good hexing.

“I wasn’t doing anything.” Turtledove folded her arms and frowned at him, tossing her long dark hair over one shoulder. “You can’t assign me detention or take points. I wasn’t doing anything.”

Remus held her eyes for a moment, only to see her blanche and glance away. Old anger made his nostrils flare. He smoothed it down without much effort, though. At the Sanctuary, he had at last come to terms with his extreme rage, a result of enduring the bite so young, and learned not to be afraid of it. There were many socially acceptable ways to vent it.

*Like taking points, for instance.*

“Fifteen points from Ravenclaw for insolence to a professor,” he said mildly, and saw Turtledove’s eyes widen. Ravenclaw was already almost in negative points, though Trelawney still awarded points, unaffected by what was happening in the school, and Sinistra took pity where she could. “Now, I want to know what you were doing following Harry. Didn’t that teach you anything?”

He nodded at her reddened face. None of the professors had been able to remove the curse, though everyone but Remus, Acies, and Severus had tried. They’d concluded that the end of the sunburn would have to wait for the end of Harry’s anger at her.

“He can’t—” said Turtledove, and ducked her head. Her voice came out muffled. Remus sniffed delicately, and then raised an eyebrow. She was on the verge of tears. “He can’t get away with everything he’s done,” she said. “Having a s-snake in the school. Two snakes, even. Accusing the Headmaster of child abuse. Casting spells on us.” She lifted her head and stared helplessly at Remus. “He’s becoming a Dark Lord, and we’re the only ones smart enough to see and stop him. Why doesn’t anyone believe us?”

Remus studied her in silence. He didn’t think he could correct all her misconceptions about Harry, and he didn’t want to try; the prejudice against Parselmouths, for instance, was at least as old as the prejudice against snakes themselves. But he could, and he would, try to correct the most dangerous mistake she was engaged in.

“Miss Turtledove,” he said, “I can assure you that the accusations against Albus Dumbledore are true.”

“That’s impossible.”

Remus shrugged. “I discovered the truth about Harry’s home life in his second year. His parents would do nothing. I went to the
Headmaster, thinking he could help, that surely he couldn’t know about what Lily and James—two of my dearest friends—were doing to their own son. He Obliviated me. I didn’t fully know what had happened until Harry restored my memories. Now, does that sound like the kind of wizard who would protect children?

Turtledove had shrunken away from him as if he were threatening her, and she shook her head now, spasmodically. “That’s not true,” she said. “Albus Dumbledore is a great and noble wizard. My parents told me so.”

“I believe he once was a great and noble wizard,” said Remus, thinking of the way he and his friends had fought in the First War, about what kind of leader Dumbledore had been then. Never faltering, perfectly suited to facing and battling a Dark Lord. Perhaps it was the decisions he’d had to make afterwards, in a time of nominal peace, that had started him down the long path to his fall.

“But he’s just—he’s the Light Lord,” Turtledove tried. “Can’t you see? If we don’t follow him, we’ll have no chance at all. The Light will lose to the Dark. We’ll all become slaves of You-Know-Who. He’s our only savior, and they’ve imprisoned him on the word of another Dark Lord!”

Her eyes were wide, white with the fear that had eaten her reason. Remus supposed that Dumbledore’s spell might have increased it, and perhaps lingering traces of the web were hurting her even now. But it had been there when she came into the school. Her parents had pumped poison into her ears, and he had no idea how to purge it.

But he could, perhaps, frighten her off from attacking Harry.

“Miss Turtledove,” he said, “in addition to the permission he’s received to use his magic, Harry has magical creatures defending him. The phoenix would rather weep for you than burn you, I believe, and the Omen snake could at best break your wrist. But the Many cobra would kill you.”

“And you let him walk around with that thing around his neck?” Turtledove exclaimed.

Remus inclined his head, and let his lips lift from his teeth, just slightly. Turtledove immediately pulled back.

“We must,” said Remus, “because we can guarantee him no safety otherwise, and because we would prefer not to irritate the Many hive cobras. They have accepted him as their vates, Miss Turtledove. Do you know what that word means?”


Remus nodded encouragingly. “Harry is trying to see paths clear to freedom for the magical creatures which won’t endanger them, or wizards, or other kinds of magical creatures. He’s freed a few species, but there are many, many species still to go, and other groups of the same species. That means that he’s committed to a duty and task that might take longer than his life. And the magical creatures know that, and will protect him. Even if we tried, we don’t have the right to dictate their wills any longer, since Harry won’t let us have that. So we can’t restrain the Many snake if you attack Harry and it bites you. Stay away from him.”

Turtledove frowned at him. “Is that the reason you like him so much? Protect him? Because you’re a werewolf, and he’s vates to you, too?”

Remus smiled. He wasn’t about to tell her that his wolf was itself a web, a disease, that spent its time hating and longing for blood, and especially hated Harry. He did have hope that Harry might be vates for them someday, breaking the webs, and so her statement was, in a sense, true.

“Yes,” he said, and let his teeth flash at her again.

“I could tell,” she whispered. “I could tell that you threatened me.”

“And the Headmistress would ask why, and then I would tell her why, and you would, perhaps, be expelled,” said Remus pleasantly. He had been witness to an amusing little scene on Saturday of Minerva swearing that she would expel half of Ravenclaw, if that was what it took to get the truth through the little brats’ heads. “And I think, for that threat, that you’ve earned yourself another week of detention, Miss Turtledove.”

She turned away from him with a sulky mutter of, “Yes, Professor.”

Remus let her go. He was not entirely sure that she would obey him. She might attack Harry again, there was always the chance, and this time she would end up blind or dead.
Remus found it hard to worry too much about that possible outcome. Another thing he’d learned in the Sanctuary was to fully embrace and use the few good things that being a werewolf gave him. His keener senses were one of those things, and another was a greater sense of what it meant to be free, instead of wild. Sooner or later, one had to give up on warnings. If another person was determined to run deadlons off a cliff, and you’d tried yelling and threatening and persuasion and everything short of force…

Well, she had to be free to make the choice that would shatter her head.

Remus knew better than any fully human witch or wizard exactly what Harry was, what he represented. His muttering and snarling wolf wouldn’t let him forget. That meant he valued Harry’s life more highly than that of a random Ravenclaw who seemed determined to jump. Remus would lie in the sun and watch her take a run at it, at this point.

He turned and went back to his office, where he had letters waiting for him from Claudia Griffinsnest, Delilah Gloryflower, and Hawthorn Parkinson. They were interested in trying to build a pack, though they didn’t know how as yet. They also didn’t know why they missed Fergus Opalline so much, and had turned to him for help on that.

Remus wasn’t a wandering werewolf, but he had contacts among those who were. He knew some of the refugees, and he knew some of the odd accommodations they’d made to live with their wolf natures and their utterly unexpected demands. The wolves were dark and sang of blood and hatred and sweet flesh on every day that didn’t contain a full moon, but they also approved of other werewolves, and had a kinship with them. It was best that their human hosts obey those impulses, where they weren’t destructive, and build the packs, and allow themselves to mourn when one of them died—not for a brother, not for a friend, but for a packmate.

He would share those secrets with other werewolves, because they needed them. No human but Harry was welcome to them. And that meant that no human but Harry—and only Harry if he asked—would know that there was a fourth letter currently on Remus’s desk, too, from a werewolf who had managed to secure a job in the Ministry and keep it, undetected.

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“—Bell scores! Ten points to Gryffindor!”

Harry wheeled on his Firebolt and peered over his shoulder, just in time to see Katie Bell rise triumphantly, dodging around an attack by one of the Slytherin Beaters as if she didn’t even notice him. A moment later, the Weasley twins united in an attack on the Slytherin Chasers, forcing the Beaters to pay attention to them instead. Harry shook his head. The Gryffindor team was playing brilliantly, while the Slytherin team seemed completely disorganized today. Probably all the lost sleep from guarding me, he thought sardonically.

He lifted his head, scanning restlessly for the Snitch, forcing himself to ignore Zacharias’s announcement of another ten points to Gryffindor. If he could catch the Snitch now, he could still win Slytherin the game. Gryffindor wasn’t yet that far ahead.

He saw Connor looping lazy patterns a short distance from him, head turning from side to side. Then he abruptly jerked in the direction of one of his glances, stared a short time more, and began to fall.

Harry knew his brother’s tactics, though. This was a feint. Connor just wanted to trick Harry into diving after him, in the hopes that he would be caught near the ground and a further distance from the Snitch when it did show up.

The little golden ball was still nowhere in sight, and it could still be anyone’s game.

Harry heard a Slytherin goal being announced from below with more panache than it probably deserved. He heard the slight whistle that he knew was Connor returning from the ground, disgruntled that he hadn’t managed to fool Harry. And then he saw the Snitch blazing above his head.

Harry leaned forward, legs and hand locking around the broom handle. His mind was very clear, less urgent than it had ever been while he was playing Quidditch. He had figured out the probable end of this game before he entered the air.

The speed of his Firebolt would get him to the Snitch faster than Connor could reach it. But Harry had an enormous disadvantage now: the loss of one hand, which meant that he would have to hold onto the broom with his knees alone in order to capture the damn thing. It was a dangerous maneuver. A gust of wind could send him to the ground. A sudden dodge from the Snitch could lose it for him altogether.

Connor gave a small gasp behind him, and then Harry heard him flying upward, urging his broom on with short whoops. Harry locked his gaze on the Snitch and refused to look at his brother.
Dart and shimmer and shimmy; the Snitch shot across the sky, trying to lose both determined Seekers. Harry climbed rapidly, getting above it. He banished the growing specter of fear from his mind. The other three times he’d played Quidditch against Gryffindor, it had seemed as though someone were trying to kill him—or Connor—but that wouldn’t happen this time.

The Snitch slowed to a joggle, as though it were taunting them, or didn’t think it was in much danger.

Harry came down in a slanting dive, traveling out of the sun like a hawk attacking a rabbit. Connor would be hard put to it to see him unless he shaded his eyes with one hand, and he was unlikely to remove either from the broom until he was within catching distance.

The Snitch sped up again, but Harry was ahead of Connor on a level plane now, and he knew the Firebolt was faster.

He took a deep breath and gave his broom its head.

The wind stung tears from his eyes as he flew, and joy, wild and unrestrained as the joy he’d felt when flying outside the Malfoys’ house, sang in his ears. He flew, and he flew, and he flew, and then he was even with the Snitch, and the time had come to extend his hand, do or die.

He clenched his legs down and tore his hand free, reaching out.

The Snitch smacked into his palm, and Harry closed his fingers around it. He heard Zacharias roaring from below, and the stands going mad, and Connor’s disappointed yelp from behind him.

Then a gust of wind caught him.

Harry slammed his hand back onto the Firebolt, clinging tightly as the world began to spin. Sky and earth rushed together and emptied themselves, then rushed together once more. Harry closed his eyes and held on so fiercely he thought he would crush the Snitch. The flutter of small wings against his palm reassured him, but only slightly.

He had to break his spin, and he only knew one way how.

He leaned backward, straining every muscle in his arm and shoulders, and stuck his left arm out for added momentum. The Firebolt shuddered, then tipped over backwards.

Harry landed with an ommph. He hadn’t realized the ground was that close. He blinked at the sky, and tenderly reached up, still clutching the Snitch, to feel the back of his head. It felt as though he had a bleeding lump there. At least he’d inflicted that on himself, he thought, rather than the Lestranges or Sirius or a Dobby-controlled Bludger.

“Slytherin wins!” Zacharias announced, just in case no one had heard him the first time.

The mad cheers began again, and Harry let his teammates lift him. He grimaced in pain when they did, of course, and Felborn, the new team captain since Montague had fled, shook his head.

“Can’t even have fun without putting yourself in the hospital wing, can you, Potter?” he muttered.

Harry smiled, closed his eyes, and let them say what they would. It had been wonderful, for a few hours, to forget all about anger, and all about pain.

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The anger came back a few hours later, when Harry was lying in his bed in the hospital wing, with Fred Weasley on guard and joking about whether Harry shouldn’t just catch Snitches with his skull from now on, and an owl soared through the window, open to the bright November air. Fred insisted on checking the letter it bore for hexes before Harry read it. When he turned the parchment lime-green, though, Harry rolled his eyes and snatched it from him.

He stared at the first few lines, and felt his blood turn cold, and then burning hot, and then like acid, which was an interesting array of sensations. He looked sideways, and saw Fred sitting up, his eyes fixed on Harry’s face.

“Something up?” Fred asked softly.
“I think so.” Harry scanned the letter one more time, to be sure, and then nodded. “Yes. This is from the person who impersonated me and sent the pictures to the *Daily Prophet.*” Only she hadn’t exactly impersonated him, he found as he read further, but that was beside the point, and anyway, the truth only fueled his anger. “She wrote me intending to blackmail me, and she promises that she’ll reveal Argus Veritaserum’s identity, too, if I just do what she wants.”

He turned and looked at Fred. “Could you fetch me two pieces of parchment and a quill, please?” he asked. “And go to the Owlery and tell Hedwig I want her. Oh, and a school owl.”

Fred stood up, grinning, that smile that was a mixture of amusement and a predator’s bared teeth. “You’re writing two letters back to her?”

“No,” said Harry, feeling his own mouth stretch in a wider line as his anger roared up to new heights. “One to her. The other goes to the Isle of Man.”

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**Interlude: A Kindled Soul**

*November 4th, 1995*

*Dear Mr. Potter:*

I did hope that I could speak to you less openly than this. I dreamed of a chase, a hunt, of luring you through numerous deceptive passages.

As it is, I think I should come right out and speak more frankly. I am the one who sent the pictures to the *Daily Prophet.* I am the one who gave my daughter Polyjuice and had her impersonate you. I admit it. It is a good thing to have a clean conscience at last, though nowhere near as comfortable as someone like you would proclaim it.

And why admit this? Why give my enemy such information so freely?

Three reasons, Mr. Potter. The first is that I know who Argus Veritaserum is and where he resides. I gave him the pictures, never dreaming he would do as he has done with them. They were intended to be blackmail, a subtle threat to hold over your head—not splashed on the front page of that wretched rag of a newspaper. I am perfectly willing to give him up to you. He has trespassed on my patience, and on yours, for long enough.

The second reason is the motive behind my betrayal. A test, a trip of the wire to see how you would respond. I cannot follow any but the strongest Lords, Mr. Potter. I thought you were strong after the night of the attack on Woodhouse, but then you wept over the body of a fallen comrade, giving a prime opportunity for someone to strike at you—and you had to be saved in the first place, because you were not paying attention to your surroundings. I was not convinced that your sacrificial instincts were given up. I continued to wait and watch.

Your response to the articles and to the Death Eater activity within Hogwarts has at last satisfied me. I am willing to give you Argus Veritaserum, and the photographs still in my possession, and my promise that such a test shall never happen again.

The third reason is my daughter, Edith. I have found, to my dismay, that she has become uncontrollable, and I fear that she may have encountered those at Beauxbatons who encouraged her to become intimate with French contacts of the Dark Lord. She has a spell on her that I cannot identify, and cannot break. I can only confine her to her room. If you are unconvinced of my loyalty—and why would you be convinced of it?—I am willing to trade you everything I have already mentioned for your help in curing Edith. She is my magical heir, and I love her dearly.

Can you come to me no later than next Friday, the 10th, and help me with these problems?

I await your owl.

Sincerely,
*Henrietta Bulstrode.*

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November 4th, 1995

Dear Mrs. Bulstrode:

For reasons of my own, I am accepting your offer. I will meet you on the 10th, at noon, if you will owl me with Apparition coordinates for your estate. In the meantime, please make sure that Edith gets plenty of rest, good food, and gentle care, and give her my warmest regards. One cannot be too careful with unknown spells.

Harry Potter.

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November 4th, 1995

Dear Paton Opalline:

Once, sir, a month ago, you came to me and offered me your family’s help, the alliance of the Old Blood. I have particular need of one thing you offered me then. Will you firecall me when you receive this owl? You need only speak of the fireplace at Hogwarts Hospital Wing when you toss the Floo powder into the flames. I will be waiting by the hearth at any hour in the afternoon on Sunday, which I calculate is the earliest time my owl can be expected to reach the Isle.

Your ally,
Harry Potter.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Ascent and Assent

Harry reflected that it was very tolerant of McGonagall to allow them to keep meeting in the Room of Requirement. He didn’t know any other area on Hogwarts grounds that would be large enough to contain so many of his allies comfortably, and without requiring the ones who didn’t like each other to sit next to each other. Of course, the Headmistress probably didn’t trust them completely, since she was sitting in with them as usual, but it was still generous of her.

You’re putting off what you know you need to do.

Harry sighed, and tugged his scattered thoughts together, in a direction that would lead them away from generosity. He straightened from his slump against the wall, and Draco, who’d been standing with him, scurried over and took a seat. Harry met the eyes of the people he’d invited here, one by one.

In truth, it was most of his allies. Elfrida Bulstrode and Laura Gloryflower he’d had to leave out, because their puellaris vows would compel them to do unfortunate things when they got near Henrietta, if what Harry suspected about Edith was true. Adalrico had chosen to stay home with his wife. Claudia Griffinsnest hadn’t been able to come; someone suspected that she was a werewolf, and she had to remain in sight and not do anything suspicious for a few weeks. Delilah Gloryflower would have told her aunt about the meeting, since Laura was the head of the Gloryflower family, so Harry had also had, reluctantly, to leave her at home. The decision to leave Mortimer Belville and Edward Burke unformed had been Harry’s own. He hadn’t been able to contact Arabella Zabini, and he’d tried to contact Regulus, but also proven unsuccessful. Snape had answered shortly that he was having some trouble with the Ministry, and Harry had known better than to inquire further. (He’d also unwound the Many snake from his throat this morning and left her napping on his pillow).

Tybalt and John were there, though, grinning. Honoria sat beside them, her hands clasped and her eyes bright, although no smile graced her face. She seemed content to wait and see what Harry would do. Ignifer sat beside Honoria, now and then regarding her suspiciously, though he watched Harry with a look of absolute trust.

There was an empty chair, and then the rest of Harry’s allies. Charles clasped his hands behind his head, his gaze never wavering from Harry’s face. Thomas had his nose buried in a book. Hawthorn and Remus were talking in low, rapid voices, though they exchanged a few last words and faced back to the front when they saw Harry waiting. The Malfoys sat at their ease, like a pair of trained gyrfalcons getting ready to swoop down on their prey, and Draco at their side. Snape was not far from them, his face for once neutral. He’d seemed more cautious, less prone to judge Harry at once, ever since he had shared the breaking of Dumbledore’s web with Harry.

McGonagall sat at the far end of the line, as if she were heading the meeting, though she kept looking curiously at the empty chair.
behind her. Harry had deliberately asked her to keep it empty for him. She’d done so, and asked no questions. But now it was almost time to end the waiting, anyway.

Harry closed his eyes and summoned the rage that waited just under the surface of his mind, if he cared to look for it. Then it hit him like a blow, and abruptly his magic unfolded around him, snarling. He looked up to meet the considerably startled gazes of his allies. Even Thomas had been distracted from his book, something ponderous having to do with South African magic.

“How did you do that?” he demanded.

“How did you do that?” Harry shrugged. “It happens when I’m angry.”

“What do you have to be angry about?” Charles sounded less as if he were making an intellectual inquiry than Thomas did, but his eyes were still shadowed. Harry could guess why. Harry had said only that the purpose of this meeting had something to do with Henrietta. Charles must be wondering if Harry was moving too quickly, letting rage determine his best course rather than rational thinking.

I’ve had a week to do the rational thinking. Harry had hammered out a plan that pleased him, in a hard-edged way. And the only one whose help he needed to perform it was Paton Opalline’s. The rest of his allies were here to learn why he was doing this to Henrietta, to observe…

And take away a lesson. Harry didn’t know if the traitor was here today, but if he was, then Harry wanted him sweating.

“Henrietta Bulstrode,” he said simply. That snared the complete attention of anyone whose mind might have been wandering before, judging by the way that a few of them leaned forward. “She sent me a letter on Saturday claiming responsibility for the pictures of me smashing Augurey chicks that reached the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. She said it was part of a blackmail attempt that should never have reached the public. She promised to give me Argus Veritaserum, the rest of the pictures, and her complete loyalty if I would simply come to her and free her daughter, Edith, whom she claims is under a spell of some kind.”

“If she’s under a spell, it would only be one that Henrietta put there,” said Ignifer, eyes lighting. “I hate that woman.”

“I know that,” said Harry calmly. “And I have help in dealing with that aspect of things.” He turned to face the door of the Room of Requirement. “You can come in now, sir.”

Paton Opalline entered. He’d dropped the glamour since he arrived at the school yesterday to talk to Harry and finalize the details of their plan. His tattoos swirled and danced across his body, pulsing with threads of gold and red light quite separate from the inked lines themselves. Harry wondered what that meant, but didn’t ask. He was too busy watching the expressions on the faces of his allies as they stared at Paton.

Almost all of them looked contemptuous. Honoria and Thomas were the only exceptions, Honoria for looking as if she would burst out laughing and Thomas for his wide-eyed fascination; Harry half-expected him to murmur something along the lines of, “Oooh, pretty.”

As I thought, then. Most of them must despise the Old Blood because they won’t kill. That means that they cannot have a part in the plan I put together today, even if they want it. Harry was more grateful than ever that Henrietta’s letter had arrived when he was alone except for Fred Weasley, and that Fred had thought it a grand joke to arrange everything in secret, even getting Madam Pomfrey out of the hospital wing on Sunday so that Harry could talk to Paton in private. Draco and Snape would no doubt have insisted on killing Henrietta right away.

And that is stupid. She needs to be dealt with. Killing is not dealing with her. It sends no message to the traitor. And I have only some rights over her. There is one who has more.

“If you would sit down, sir,” said Harry, nodding Paton to the empty seat next to McGonagall. Paton ambled over and did as he was told, eyes bright as he took in the gazes of everyone watching him. Harry supposed he must be used to the scorn. He had told Harry that most Light families despised his own for refusing to take part in Ministry politics and accumulate wealth; Merlin knew what the Dark families would think.

“Ah,” said Lucius, his voice low and hard. “It’s the breeder who makes the Weasleys look sane.”

“It is true that I have nine children, Malfy, and had ten until recently, until Fergus died,” said Paton, without hesitation, touch his mourning-cropped hair.
Lucius’s lip curled, and it seemed as if he would say something else, but Harry said, “Mr. Malfoy, I will not hear any further insults from you.”

Lucius blinked and stared at Harry for a split second before he wiped his face clean. Such staring was a weakness in the pureblood dances, a sign that the dancer had been taken by surprise. Lucius wouldn’t want to show that off. He turned his head away instead, the slightest bit.

“As you wish, Mr. Potter,” he mumbled.

“I do wish.” Harry unfolded a bit more of his own magic. It wasn’t hard, not with the rage that reminded him of the dragons’ songs, wild and oblivious to anything outside itself. “Mr. Opalline will help me convince Henrietta Bulstrode that she has gone too far against me. He will help me punish her. The rest of you are coming along as witnesses. Do not interfere.”

“You mention that this—this woman did those things to you, and you don’t want us to interfere?” Draco was almost vibrating in place on his chair. “You can’t mean that, Harry.”

Harry turned and faced him. This was actually likely to be one of the hardest tests. If he could stand intimidating Draco at need, then he could face intimidating any of the others, to most of whom he had less emotional commitment.

Draco started back, and then dropped his eyes. That left a pure silence for Harry’s words to break into.

“Yes, I do wish it.” Harry surprised himself by how calm he sounded, and then realized his voice wasn’t calm. It was quiet, but harsh, like the pause before the thunder sounded. “None of you will do anything to harm Henrietta. None of you will do anything to assist me. You will watch. I wished you to know what I do to allies who turn against me like this, and who hurt innocents.”

“Her daughter’s been hurt, certainly,” said Charles, sounding a bit bewildered. “But who else?”

Harry stared at him. Did the man miss that article altogether?

“Did the man miss that article altogether? “The Augurey chicks.”

Charles nodded, but Harry could see that he didn’t really understand. His own wild contempt grew in him, and he had to stamp down on it. Most wizards still didn’t understand the way Harry saw magical creatures, whether or not they were ever likely to be useful allies to him in war. They existed. That gave them the right to any freedom and possibility they could have that didn’t trample on others’ freedom and possibilities. And it meant that Harry despised wizards and witches who hurt them just because.

“You’ve made me your leader,” he said. “Supposedly.” His gaze cracked from face to face, searching for the slightest sign of disobedience or boredom. “And most of the time, I’ll welcome your questioning, your strategies, your eagerness to challenge me and have some things your own way. Not this time. If you cannot consent to come with me and stay in the background, I’ll leave you in the Room of Requirement until I’m done.” With the Headmistress of Hogwarts on one’s side, one could do things like that.

One by one, everyone involved bowed their heads, or their necks, or gave another sign that they wouldn’t challenge him. Harry held a staring contest with Snape for several minutes until he seemed to realize that he was making Harry look bad, and consented with a sneer.

Harry turned and caught Paton’s eye. “Let’s go,” he said.

Paton smiled, and the red and gold lines racing over his tattoos animated further, covering his shoulders and white-blond hair in a dancing haze. “Let’s.”

******

Henrietta paused in her pacing and her humming to caress Edith’s hair. Her daughter huddled away from her as much as the large chair she sat in would allow.

“Oh-ah-ah,” said Henrietta chidingly.

Edith froze, and sat still. Henrietta stroked her hair and scratched under her chin, smiling at the spell around her daughter’s throat all the while. It looked like a hooked collar of white and green light. Potter would be concerned the moment he saw it, of course, and he would not recognize it, because it wasn’t a spell that existed outside Henrietta’s branch of the Bulstrode family. He’d try to break it, though. Even if he didn’t completely believe her letter—and he would have been a fool to do so, not worthy of being Henrietta’s tool—then concern for Edith would bring him along. And once he saw that Edith wore this kind of spell, then it wouldn’t matter if he thought the caster was Henrietta or Voldemort himself. He would still want to free her.
And his interference, any break he put into the spell, would damage Edith’s mind. It was damage that would heal in a year or two, of course, but Henrietta didn’t intend to tell him that. What mattered was that in his guilt, he would consent to do anything she asked. Henrietta knew his psychology. She had only to get her teeth into him and watch him twist in her jaws.

He’d said that he was coming alone when she sent him the letter with the Apparition coordinates. Henrietta was not worried if he did come with someone else. She was the strongest of his allies with the exception of Severus Snape, and she was on her own territory. She had several rune circles prepared, and nastier spells and traps, just in case Potter decided to be…uncooperative.

She and Edith were waiting in the main library, a large room on the ground floor with windows that appeared on whatever wall the most light was currently coming from, tracking the sun throughout the day until it sank. Then they vanished, and candles appeared. Right now, they were evenly distributed throughout the room, and admitted more than enough illumination to let Henrietta make out the tears on her daughter’s cheeks. She only voiced a tiny whimper when her mother stroked her hair this time, but that was all right. Henrietta could take pleasure in delicate sensations as well as the kind of complete surrender that she expected to have from Potter in a few minutes.

She lost track of how long she stood there. The dreams of the future were brighter and more vivid than the reality surrounding her.

Then her wards were destroyed.

Henrietta reeled, every alarm that her home possessed ringing in her ears, shrieking in her skull from the mental ties, and making her bones shake as they were spelled to do in case she was in such a deep sleep she didn’t hear them. She stared up, gasping, tears flooding her eyes, and trying to determine what had happened.

Her wards were—gone. When she reached out to them, nothing was there. They’d been smashed as effectively as if a manticore had taken its tail to planes of ivory. Henrietta shook her head, dazed. There must be something still there. Each ward had a homing spell at the very bottom of its multiple layers; if someone did manage to destroy all the other spells that made them up, then the shards would sink into the ground and flow back to her. She should be tingling with magical power right about now from the remnants of all the wards on her house, and she was not.

Then her nose began abruptly to burn. It smelled as though the mother of all thunderstorms were rolling in.

Either a storm like that was coming, one that would make the Augureys shriek themselves hoarse in foretelling it—

Or she had an enraged Lord on her doorstep.

Henrietta scrambled up. She hadn’t thought it would come to this, ever. Potter had the power of a Lord, but his will was chained from using it. He was too soft, too delicate, and thought too much about stepping on toes. Henrietta had been certain she could control him because he had left the halter of kindness on his neck with the reins dangling for anyone who wanted to do so.

It seems I was wrong.

But she could still adapt, and survive. She was a Slytherin, and a Slytherin always had a backup plan. She turned and walked swiftly across the room, though she still shook from the impact of the wards’ razing, and stepped into the circle composed of rune blocks on the floor near the furthest bookshelves. The circle shuddered slightly, and then closed around her. The markings shone silver and gold, a subtle shimmer of power. Henrietta took a deep breath, and felt her panic calming and some extra magic flowing into her. She’d split off a piece of her power long ago, but instead of binding it into one object, like a sword or a staff, the way the majority of wizards and witches did, she’d bound it into these rune blocks. Broken apart and scattered, they each carried only a trapped grain of magic, one that couldn’t be released without the presence of its fellows. Together, they gave her back nearly everything.

Henrietta snarled softly and pushed her fingers through her thick brown hair, shoving it back from her face. If he wants a battle, then he’ll have a battle. I shouldn’t have to fight him, he should yield the moment he sees the spell around Edith’s neck, but he might strike at me before he sees it.

Reassured, she drew her wand and gestured at the door into the library. “Findo extos,” she murmured. A shimmering line of silver power raced across the doorway, coiling close to the floor. Henrietta smiled slightly. This was a nastier version of the Entrail-Expelling Curse, one that struck from the inside only. Potter wouldn’t see that, and it would trip him up a bit when his viscera began abruptly to divide into smaller and smaller pieces. He’d manage to overcome it, of course, but Henrietta would use the extra moments to make him observe the spell around Edith’s neck. And she should have even longer than the spell would ordinarily win her, because, since Potter’s experience with the Entrail-Expelling Curse itself, he should have a panic reaction to
anything that felt even a little like that. She’d have those few extra seconds.

She congratulated herself, and was just striding across the library to stand beside Edith’s chair again when she felt another presence enter the room with her.

Henrietta turned at once, wand in hand. So perhaps Potter’s Apparated into the library. He shouldn’t have been able to, not when he didn’t know what it looked like, but Lords could do things other wizards could not. That was all right. She had spells that could take care of that, too.

The silver spell she’d placed against the doorway snapped, unraveled, and trailed out like entrails itself, yanked down an invisible maw. Then the faint shine of some of the books on the shelves stopped, and then a few of the trap spells that Henrietta had placed on the walls, and then another rune circle, gleaming unobtrusively in the corner.

Fuck. Henrietta’s heart pounded erratically. Potter had sent that damn magic-eating ability of his ahead of him, and it was even more unnerving to watch her own power vanishing into thin air than it was to see Potter gnawing and ripping it away from Voldemort.

She wouldn’t allow that ability to touch her. She wouldn’t. She was not about to lose her magic. Her magic, along with the strength of her will, was what exalted her and made her different than the other people who surrounded her. She would rather die than lose her magic.

She aimed her wand at where the front edge of that loss of magic must be, given the vanishing lights, and murmured, “Permuto,” throwing all her will behind the incantation.

The magic-eating ability should have changed completely, become magic, and then allowed her to recapture and command any power she’d lost again. Instead, her own spell whistled down the invisible thing’s gullet, and Henrietta felt fear stirring in her like some forest creature she’d crushed.

Then the walls around her buckled. Henrietta whipped about, hearing Edith shriek from her chair, and saw the magical windows enlarging until they made the entire room transparent. She could easily see her own lawn now, mantled with sunshine and desiccated leaves.

And covered with wizards and witches, with Potter in front of them. At his side stood a single wizard with messy white-blond hair and a stern, direct gaze. His skin bristled with tattoos.

The look in Potter’s eyes made Henrietta know terror for the first time in thirteen years, when she’d thought she might die in childbirth. She knew he would be well-protected, and that she shouldn’t try to hex him. But the man beside him was fair game, and he didn’t even have a shield.

She aimed her wand at him and didn’t speak the spell aloud, simply letting it fly and crash through her window. The idiot shouldn’t be able to resist it, especially since he looked like a Light wizard, the kind that didn’t fight. Potter, intent on swallowing her magic, glutted with it, shouldn’t notice in time to stop it.

Potter, indeed, did not react, but the Light wizard did. Smiling, he lifted one arm, and the red and gold shimmer around his skin grew suddenly thick, into a shield that repelled the curse without a sound. It soared high and shattered harmlessly into the air, scattering scarlet sparks down on Henrietta’s erstwhile allies.

Henrietta snarled as she remembered what those tattoos meant. Old Blood. Holding money in common, blood in common—and magic in common. He can draw on the magic of all his family members at once if he needs to. Some kind of damn reservoir, they are. Shit.

“Henrietta.”

She shuddered, and told herself that it wasn’t power that compelled her to look. Potter wouldn’t do that, whatever else she thought of him. Her head snapped around anyway, though, and she locked eyes with the fifteen-year-old boy she would never have thought could frighten her as he did now.

He has the ability to eat magic. Where does it end? He could swallow the entire wizarding population of Britain if he wanted, and then the rest of Europe, and then the world. If he wanted. What keeps that in check? A set of morals? What if he gets tired of them?
She understood, now, with exquisite clarity, why Albus Dumbledore had tried to enslave Harry Potter when he was still a child, not young enough to have a will of his own.

Potter took two steps forward. His eyes were as brilliant a green as life. “Where is your daughter?”

And Henrietta felt hope bloom in her heart like a fever, though she fought hard to keep it from infecting her expression. She was good at that, though. All Slytherins were. “In the library,” she said, tonelessly, and stepped out of the way, bowing her head. She knew that she couldn’t strike back at Potter right now. He would only eat her magic.

She had to watch, and wait, for a time. If she was right, the best time ought to be in a few moments, when Potter tried to break the spell, damaged Edith’s mind, and was torn apart by his guilt and sorrow.

She watched from beneath lowered eyelids as Potter Vanished the glass in the window, and he and the Light wizard walked across the library to Edith. The shield around her went away when Potter looked at it, of course, and then he leaned forward and stared at the hooked spell on her neck.

Henrietta tensed, waiting for the moment when he would try to break it.

Instead, Potter stepped aside and said, “Paton.”

The Light wizard closed his eyes and clasped his hands together. “We have kept the vows of the Old Blood,” he said. It sounded like a prayer. “We have not killed save in defense of our own, we have not sought power, we have not sought vengeance. We have not cast any of our blood out to die, though they were born powerless. We have shared the good things in life, and sought to diminish evil by sharing as well. Here, in the name of a child whose mother has hurt her, by the will of a family who finds that abhorrent and has since the dawn of their days, I ask the Light’s help, in the name of the Light. Fiat lux, lux aeterna!”

Light blossomed from between his hands, a white spark so bright that Henrietta’s eyes watered and she wanted to look away. But some compulsion kept her in place, staring, the same one that had made her look at Potter. She had to watch as the Light wizard’s hands fell open like the petals of an unfolding flower and the spark breathed out over them, so brilliant, so mighty, so different from the Dark Henrietta had served all her life that she trembled in hatred and unwilling awe.

The Light moved to trail a rope of fire like burning magnesium from the wizard’s hands to the spell around Edith’s neck. It traced the barbed hook of it, and then there came a noise like a sigh, and Henrietta thought she heard a song, sung in high, piercing, ecstatic voices, compounded of joy that would break her mind if she understood it, of leaping flames, of leaping light, light, and light, and light once again—

And then the moment was gone, and the trail of fire fell away from Edith’s neck, and the spell fell away with it, the spell that no one outside the Bulstrode family should have known or been able to break.

_Trust Potter to find the one ally who could_, Henrietta thought, her bitterness drowning her alive.

“So ever the Light doth shine against the Dark,” the wizard said softly, and closed his eyes, some of the joy Henrietta had heard in his face.

Potter knelt down in front of Edith and said, in a voice that should not have come from a Lord’s mouth because it was too gentle, “Edith? You get to make your own decisions now.”

Henrietta heard a rustle of robes behind her, and knew that Potter’s allies had arrived. She didn’t turn to look at them. She was too busy watching Potter talk to her daughter, and knowing that her daughter would condemn her to death. It was what Henrietta would have done in her place.

Edith made a small, frightened sound. Potter must have heard a question, because he said, “Because I know what it’s like, Edith. My parents hurt me, though doubtless not in the same ways. Neither of them was as _clever_ as your mother.” He said “clever” like it was an insult, and he turned his head.

Henrietta changed her mind when she met his eyes again. Death, even one made to repay her daughter for the humiliation Henrietta had put her through, must be better than living and suffering at Potter’s hands.

Edith uncurled a bit, and whispered something to Potter. Potter’s head snapped back around at once, and his hand rose and hovered gently over her shoulder.
“Because no one gave me a choice,” he said. “No one cared what I wanted, how I wanted my parents to be punished, or not
punished, for what they did to me.” Henrietta wished she could turn her head and see how those words slammed home like a spear
in Snape, who had betrayed Potter’s parents to the Ministry, but she had lost the power of movement. “Yes, your mother’s done
evil to me, but she’s done more to you. Yours is the right of justice, if you wish to take it. Paton can teach you spells that right the
wrongs done to you, but only you can use them.”

Henrietta felt a deep coil of loathing pinch her guts. Why didn’t my ancestors take the precaution of eliminating the Old Blood?
They should have.

Edith took a deep breath, and then sat up and shook her head. For the first time, her voice was audible enough to be heard by the
rest of the room. “No. I don’t want her killed. I don’t want anything to do with her, not ever again. I don’t want to see her again. I
don’t want people to know in the newspapers, the way they did with your parents. I just—can you take me back with you, to
Hogwarts? Then I’ll know she can’t touch me, if I’m near you.”

Grudgingly, Henrietta had to admire her daughter’s ploy. It was the only way that would insure Edith was absolutely safe from
her mother’s anger, to live in the same place a Lord lived.

“Of course, Edith,” said Harry softly. He looked at Paton. “Can you lead her out of here, Paton? I don’t think she should see the
rest of this.”

The Light wizard knelt and extended his own hand. Edith trustingly reached out to him, and the Light wizard pulled her into his
arms. Edith didn’t protest, though Henrietta had never known her daughter to like being held since she was two years old. She
closed her eyes and clung tight as they passed Henrietta, so that she didn’t have to look at her mother.

Henrietta couldn’t watch her for long. Potter had taken a step forward, and was staring at her, and it was impossible to look at
anything else when his eyes blazed like that.

“Henrietta Bulstrode,” said Potter softly. “I don’t intend to kill you, since your daughter doesn’t want you dead. But I intend to
bind you, so that you can never hurt me again, and will make up for the hurt you have done me.”

Henrietta felt a bit of her confidence return. Potter was too soft-hearted to do the things that would really assure her compliance,
and if he took her magic, then she couldn’t help him in any way. It was beginning to seem as if he wouldn’t punish her enough,
and then, in a year or two, she could at least try to get some of her own back.

Potter looked sideways, at his allies. “Professor Snape,” he said. “Will you be our Bonder?”

The confidence froze again. Henrietta narrowed her eyes. No. He cannot mean—no.

“Gladly,” said Snape, and strode forward. Henrietta could feel his magic flexing its claws, and knew how badly he wanted to kill
her. But he kept it under control, following this child-Lord with as much obedience as if he were Voldemort himself.

And still Henrietta thought he could not mean it, because Potter hated all forms of compulsion. “What do you mean to have him
do with that thing, Potter?” she asked, nodding at Snape’s wand.

“Bond us,” said Potter. “You are going to make me two Unbreakable Vows today, Henrietta.” He knelt and extended his hand.

Henrietta knew there was no way out of an Unbreakable Vow—intimately, since several books in her library concerned her
ancestors’ attempts to find a way around it. If she broke one of its clauses, then she would die. It was a simple matter, and it was a
chain that she had never thought Potter would use.

“No,” she said.

Potter looked up at her. “You will agree to it,” he said calmly, “or I will drain all of your magic, including all of your magical
artifacts, and your rune circles, and I’ll break your wand. I can still get the help I intend to demand from you with your money.
Kneel, Henrietta.”

This was impossible. Impossible that she could have lost, impossible that she could have been caught against the wall with no
backup plan.

But if the choices were between taking the Vows and loss of her magic, Henrietta knew which one she would embrace. Besides,
there was the fact that Potter still was what he was, someone raised to be rotted with compassion from the inside out, like a blight.
His demands might be easier to live with than he imagined they would be at the moment.

Henrietta took a deep breath and knelt, reaching out to clasp Potter’s hand. It would have been gratifying to find that it was hot, or sweaty, like her own, but it was cool. Potter turned and looked up at Snape, who held his wand at the ready and was murmuring the incantation for the Vow.

“No, Henrietta Bulstrode,” Potter asked, “swear never to hurt your daughter, Edith Bulstrode, again, by magic, by word, by deed, by conspiracy, or by indirect action through another person?”

Henrietta felt herself relax. She ought not to have worried. She was accustomed to Potter’s ways. Of course he would seek safety and protection for someone other than himself. And Henrietta could always have other children, though she would miss Edith’s perfect obedience.

“I do swear it,” she answered.

A line of fire shot out from Snape’s wand and encircled her and Potter’s joined hands. Henrietta shivered. It felt as heavy as a chain. She hated it. But she could live with it.

“No, Henrietta Bulstrode,” asked Potter, his eyes on her again and steady as steel, “swear never to hurt your husband, Tertian Bulstrode, again, by magic, by word, by deed, by conspiracy, or by indirect action through another person?”

Henrietta blinked. He cares about Tertian? But then, this is Potter. He cares about everybody.

“I do so swear.”

A second line of fire, a second chain, and Henrietta barely kept herself from wriggling. It was disgusting, that she, a free pureblood witch with the magic and position to enforce her will, should be bound like this. But needs must. And the third clause would probably be one of safety and protection, too. Henrietta wondered if he would forbid her from going after his allies.

“No, Henrietta Bulstrode, swear never to hurt me, Harry Potter, again, by magic, by word, by deed, by conspiracy, or by indirect action through another person?”

Henrietta was quite tired of freezing, but it seemed that she could have no other reaction when Potter said something so extraordinary. She stared at him, at his serious face, and listened to the words that would destroy any chance of her ever taking vengeance on him in the future.

Wouldn’t it be better to die than accept this loss of freedom?

But, no, no, it wouldn’t. A miserable life was better than a proud death, however she might have felt in the heat of the moment. Every Slytherin knew that.

It was hard, but Henrietta subdued her pride, and said, “I do so swear.”

The third line of fire joined the other two, and then all three vanished. Henrietta shook her free hand. It felt as though the chains were still encircling her body, constricting her when she tried to stretch muscles she hadn’t known she had, hemming her into a smaller circle of life.

I hate this.

And there was a second one to get through. Henrietta supposed the first thing Potter would ask for was the safety of his allies.

He did not. Instead, Potter said, “Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode, swear to use half your wealth to build a sanctuary for nesting Augurey birds, to take an active interest in this sanctuary and to promote the welfare of the species, and to offer an apology for the chicks you caused to be murdered in the presence of my phoenix, Fawkes, that he might translate it for them?”

This is ridiculous. Henrietta shook her head, not in refusal, but in bewilderment. “Why do you care so much, Potter?” she asked. “It isn’t even as though Augureys can speak, like centaurs or merfolk.”

“No, you so swear?”

Henrietta closed her eyes. Half her wealth gone. Potter had netted her neatly there, not even specifying “money,” and thus
obliging her to give up valuable magical artifacts and gems as well as coins.

“I do so swear,” she whispered.

“Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode, swear to leave the rest of your wealth to your daughter and magical heir, Edith Bulstrode, for her use and support and enjoyment, until and unless she clearly expresses that she does not desire it?”

Caught there, too. Henrietta opened her eyes and stared bleakly at Potter. He’s determined to take away every freedom that I might have had.

“I do so swear,” she said, because what else was there to do? She found she couldn’t look at the second line of fire as it joined the first.

Potter leaned nearer. His eyes seemed to fill the whole of the world.

“Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode,” said the horrible voice, “swear never to use your magic again, except at my express command, and then only in the form of those spells I tell you are yours to use?”

It was the final assault. It was the final indignity. It was the strike that ripped through Henrietta’s tangled ambitions and finally showed her the truth of matters, how they stood, that she was never going to be able to fight against Potter and had to give up her dreams of a future vengeance.

She bowed her head. The world was very harsh around her, sunlit, and not because of the Vanished windows.

And yet, somehow, it was fitting. She had fought, and lost. She had made backup plans, and they had not been strong enough. She had made stupid mistakes, and thus she deserved to lose.

She had been outwitted, outsmarted, thought around. And it was the only kind of defeat that she could have brought herself even marginally to accept. Being “persuaded” by half-baked philosophy, as Dumbledore would have tried, or pressed against her will to become a mindless servant, as Voldemort would have done, had done during the First War, was intolerable.

To have tried her very best and lost was something else again. And now, she did have a future, if she tried her very best in another direction, because Potter was not like those other Lords; she could see it now. The way he cared about Augureys as much as humans argued against it. He was vates, the way he had always said he was, and that meant she could trust his word.

If I must have someone in charge of my life, Henrietta thought, as she lifted her head and stared at Potter, I would rather have a vates than any Lord. He is more like the ancient Lords, the way I thought he might once be. The old legends have come to life again, and I am dwelling in the middle of one. And I can admit when I am beaten. I can give in and bow my neck.

I yield. I yield everything I am, with eyes open, to a chosen loyalty.

“I do so swear,” she said, and saw Potter’s eyes widen as the third line of fire bound them and she smiled. She knew he would be searching for clues to treachery in her gaze, some way of seeing that she was less than sincere.

He would not find them. Henrietta was sincere, this time, and she knew the peace of giving over. She’d never known it before. Any opponent she’d faced was weaker than she was, could be deceived or manipulated or tricked around. No one had ever cornered her.

Now, Potter had, and there was a sudden death of uncertainty in her life. Henrietta knew she would hate it at points in the future, but for now, it filled her with a deep calm.

I can do nothing else, so let me at least apply my mind and what other resources I might muster to the task of doing well by him, of making up for my stupidity in opposing him. And the first part of that shall be telling him Argus Veritaserum’s true name.

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Harry leaned forward, clutching the edge of his chair and trying not to let on how nervous he was. He was fairly sure he knew where the Sorting Hat would place Edith, but if it put her into Ravenclaw, a House hostile to him…

The Hat gave a little chuckle. “GRYFFINDOR!” it announced cheerily.
Harry leaned back and sighed in relief. Then he glanced across the Headmistress’s office at Connor, who’d been irritated to be left behind at first, but placated once he understood the importance of their mission and invited to attend Edith’s Sorting, along with Snape and Draco. The rest of Harry’s allies had already departed, their expressions ranging from shocked to thoughtful to pleased. Paton, alone, had left with a smile, and a quiet word to Edith about her being part of the Opalline family now. If she wanted, they had relatives in the Ministry who would assist her in changing her last name.

Connor nodded at him, eyes bright and face determined. Edith would find a perfect welcome in her new House—the House Harry had thought she would go into, from the moment she picked up the courage to speak to him as she had in front of her mother and a room full of strangers. Harry knew Gryffindors weren’t protective of their own in the same way as Slytherins were, but honest gentleness, and equally open snarling and snarling at anyone who tried to hurt her, were better for Edith than the unobtrusiveness with which Slytherins expressed their affection. She needed to know she was loved.

“Come on, Edith,” said Connor, gently, standing and holding out his hand. Edith took the Hat off her head and stared at him uncertainly, but some of her fear melted when Connor added, “I’m Connor Potter, Harry’s brother, and I’m part of Gryffindor. I don’t think anyone can wait to meet you. Harry told me he thought you’d be part of our House.”

That relaxed Edith, and she gave Harry a little smile, and then went out the door with Connor, who hovered protectively over her. That left Harry to face McGonagall, and Snape, and Draco.

The Headmistress, luckily, took one look at his face, and said, “Go rest, Harry. I think my questions can wait until tomorrow.”

Harry nodded in relief and then turned and left the office. He heard Snape and Draco following him, but they didn’t begin the interrogation until they were out of the moving staircase, knowing as well as he did that McGonagall had wards to watch and listen to people there.

The first thing Draco said was, “I don’t understand why you didn’t tell us,” and his voice was small and hurt. Harry sighed and ran his hand through his hair. He felt hollow without the rage supporting him any more.

“Because I thought you would interfere, and insist that Henrietta should receive a harsher punishment than she got,” he said honestly. “I knew you wouldn’t want me to leave the punishment up to Edith.”

“But she hurt you!” Draco caught his left wrist and pulled hard enough to spin him towards the wall of the corridor. Harry braced his shoulder on the stones and arched an eyebrow at his boyfriend. Draco just went on scowling. “She did deserve death, or the complete loss of her magic.”

“No, she didn’t,” said Harry. “I wanted Edith to have first crack at her, and since she didn’t want it, I bound her by the Unbreakable Vows I thought were right. And that is the end of the matter, Draco. She’s bound, captured, stopped. You didn’t see the look in her eyes after she took the Second Vow. I did. She handed her heart over to me on a platter, Merlin knows why. Slytherin worship of power, I suppose.”

Draco stared into his eyes for a moment longer, then shook his head. “I still think you’re too forgiving, Harry.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Why? Because I don’t kill everyone who turns on me?”

Draco’s look just got fiercer. “I have something to show you later,” was all he said, and he released Harry’s wrist and turned towards the dungeons. “I still have to do some research on it first.”

Harry didn’t bother following him. He knew Snape had a question to ask him, and he let Draco leave, and he let Snape ask.

“You still believe that my method of handling your parents and Dumbledore was wrong,” said Snape, and it wasn’t really a question.

Harry bared his teeth. “Yes, I do,” he said. “You know why.”

“I wish you could talk to me about it.” And Snape really did look wistful, an expression Harry had never seen on his face before. “In lieu of that, would you be willing to speak with Regulus? He expects to be free of the Ministry soon. He is clearing up the last doubts as to who he is and whether he has really abandoned his old allegiances. But in a few days—”

Harry shook his head. It was answer enough. Snape fell silent, and for a few moments they walked towards the dungeons without speaking to each other. Snape at last broke the tension with a hesitant question.
“Harry.” Harry looked up at him, but didn’t quit walking. “What would you have done, were you in the same situation as Miss Bulstrode?”

I know the answer, but he’s not going to like it. Snape had asked for honesty, though, so he was going to get honesty.

“Able to control my fate, you mean? Able to decide for myself how many of my secrets I wanted other people to know?” Snape’s eyes darkened with distress, but he didn’t interrupt. “I would have done what she did,” said Harry, “keeping it quiet, except that I would have used my own power to make sure my parents and Dumbledore couldn’t hurt me again. And then, when I could stand to be in the same room without wanting to kill them, I would arrange visits with them, to try and help them change. If Henrietta can do it, they can.”

“Henrietta Bulstrode is a Slytherin, and your parents and Dumbledore are not,” said Snape. “It makes the difference, as you have so accurately divined.” He didn’t sound angry, though, and the sarcasm was more reflex than anything else. “Harry…if you will tell me, what do you intend to do at the trial?”

Six days. My parents go to trial in six days.

“The victim is not allowed to testify for either defense or prosecution,” said Harry calmly. “And of course it would be wrong of me to use my magic on the Wizengamot, or the witnesses, compelling them to change what they will say or believe.”

“Otherwise?” Snape asked.

Harry halted and looked up at him. This was too important to make a mistake about. Snape stopped, too, and met his gaze.

“I will fight as hard as I can with the weapons permitted me,” said Harry, precisely, “words, and experience, and explanation of my memories. I will fight not to see them executed. I will fight to give them a fair trial, one not prejudiced by personal emotions. And I will fight to see them free, if it does not involve trampling on other people’s wills.”

Snape hissed as though someone had kicked him in the solar plexus. He said nothing. Harry turned and continued on to the Slytherin common room alone, though he felt Snape’s gaze on his back like a hand.

Argus Veritaserum’s real name is Homer Digle. He’s a Muggleborn Auror. I can find him easily enough.

The distraction, for he was using it that way, only lasted for so long, and then his emotions blurred and slewed and went back to the subject of his conversation with Snape. Harry bared his teeth.

I owe everyone around me so much—for trust, for belief in me, for loyalty, for love, for their very existence that demands they be allowed to live and grow as much as possible. I am incredibly in debt to them.

But this belongs to me. This is mine. They don’t understand why I’m fighting for my parents. They can’t comprehend why I want to forgive them. That’s all right. Let them not understand. Let them not comprehend. They’re not the ones engaged in this. I want to do this, and it’s mine, and it’s my choice not to “talk” to someone the way Snape wants me to, and I wish it could have been handled quietly but it wasn’t, and now I’m going to fight with every muscle in my body, every ounce of my will, to see them alive, and, if I can, free.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine: Home Truths

Rufus opened the letter cautiously. He didn’t really think Harry would have sent him a letter that would explode, of course, but he was not sure that he wanted to know what was in it. None of the post he’d received in the past few days was good, though some of it was simply confusing, like the message he’d received detailing Henrietta Bulstrode’s sudden burning desire to work with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to establish an Augurey sanctuary. Rufus had simply passed it along to the appropriate people and decided not to ask.

This note was simple, but it contained words that made Rufus burn.

November 11th, 1995

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:
It seems that your Aurors are not yet fully purged. I have discovered that a Muggleborn Auror, Homer Digle, has been writing to the Daily Prophet as Argus Veritaserum. He is closely connected to Dumbledore, though almost no one knows this. I believe him to be a deep-cover member of the Order of the Phoenix, and perhaps one of a number of Muggleborn students who went to Hogwarts during my mother’s years there and became interested in sacrificial ethics due to Dumbledore’s teaching. He would be the one who arranged matters so that Dumbledore could cast his spell, I think. You may want to purge him now, since he is, rather unaccountably, still there.

Harry James Potter.

Rufus put the letter down and stared into space. He knew Homer Digle, though he would not have been able to say the man was Muggleborn. He had explained to clerk after clerk that, yes, he was connected to the pureblood Light wizarding family Diggle, but his ancestors had chosen to spell their name differently due to a disagreement with the head of the family several centuries ago.

And that explains why I never thought to look for a connection between him and the Headmaster, Rufus thought grimly. I know all of Dumbledore’s allies among the Light wizards, or I thought I did. Perhaps that was another matter that would have to be investigated, though, given the pressure that the Light wizards had put on him over the past few weeks to free their leader, Rufus was fairly sure that he did recognize all of them by now.

He stepped to his door and looked out. This morning, he had two Aurors on his door. He’d noticed the change a few days ago, and hadn’t commented on it. If his old comrades wanted to make sure the Minister was well-guarded, he would hardly wish to interfere with that. It might be what saved his life one day.

“Auror Wilmot,” he said, since Auror Feverfew was still recovering from the burns he’d taken at Fiona’s hands a few weeks ago.

Edmund Wilmot snapped to attention and glanced at him. Rufus frowned. He didn’t always like the man, though it was true Wilmot did impeccable work. There was something a bit too wild in his movements, and he smiled as if he were about to bite.

“Yes, sir,” said Wilmot, though, perfectly polite, so Rufus went ahead and gave him his mission.

“I need you to find where Auror Digle is working, and bring him to me at once,” said Rufus. “I have some disturbing news for him.”

Wilmot’s eyes lit. Rufus wondered for a moment if he could possibly know the truth, then shook his head. No, I’ll be questioning Digle myself, and probably extracting memories from him for a Pensieve. Wilmot wouldn’t be so eager if Digle knew something that could condemn him, too.

Unless Wilmot knew but Digle didn’t know…

Rufus willed the thoughts away. Caution was one thing, but he couldn’t become paranoid. Cleaning up the Ministry was a bigger job than he’d thought, that was all. He watched as Wilmot bowed and hurried off.

He spent a few moments speaking with Auror Feverfew, ascertaining that his burns were healing nicely, and then went back into his office, and confronted yet another disturbing message, this time from Madam Amelia Bones. She still held her position as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and though matters had flipped, rather, so that Rufus was her supervisor rather than the other way around, she still wrote as steadily and unflappably as ever, giving suggestions for new laws and new squadrons that she thought were a good idea.

Right now, she was making two suggestions she must think had their roots in sterling good sense.

Rufus didn’t like ‘em.

He warily studied her first proposal. True, on the surface it sounded interesting. With Death Eater numbers building again, and the Aurors still in demand for all their regular work, it made sense to designate a squad just for the capture and tracking of Voldemort’s forces. They’d had great good luck a month ago, capturing a number of Death Eaters after a battle at a valley in Wales, but they wouldn’t have that again. You-Know-Who had who-knew-how-many followers by now. There were trained war wizards in other departments who were wasted behind desks. They could become the Death Eater Removal Squadron.

Rufus was remembering what it had been like when the Aurors, briefly, had been authorized to use the Unforgivables in their campaigns against the Death Eaters in the First War.
He would not see that happen to them again.

He settled for scratching, “Needs reworking,” at the top, and then turning to her second suggestion. This was the one that made him uneasy about Dumbledore’s spell, and how deeply it might have taken hold.

Madam Bones wanted to lay the creation of a new department before the Wizengamot. The department would have the innocuous name of Investigation of Magical Disturbances. That could mean almost anything, from Unspeakable-like work to training for Obliviators.

What it was, as Madam Bones described it, was a means of registering and tracking Lord-level wizards. It would include monitoring children who showed signs of growing into such power eventually, so that, in the words of the proposal, “no child might ever be abused by his or her fearful guardians again.”

Rufus could translate that. So that we will never have a Harry Potter on our hands again. The main reason Harry had terrified everyone was the suddenness of his appearance. Lords built their magic steadily over a long period of time, and rumors ran before them; no one had been really surprised when Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald, and there were rumors of You-Know-Who long before he launched his first raid. The wizarding world had a chance to adapt to them, to adjust their thinking and political processes to fit around them. But no one knew what to do about Harry.

Rufus didn’t like it.

He was still frowning at it when the door opened, and Wilmot escorted Homer Digle in. Digle was frowning in his turn, as though he didn’t really understand what this was about. He met Rufus’s eyes with what looked like honest puzzlement.

“Is something wrong with my family, sir?” he asked.

“I know that you have betrayed us,” said Rufus, seeing no need to hush things up at this point in time. “You must have let someone into Albus Dumbledore’s cell, and you sent articles to the Prophet to fan the flames when you must have known you could encourage illegal conduct. What is your excuse?”

Digle’s hand went for his wand. He’d always been fast, Rufus remembered, but that was part of the reason he had his own wand already out. He started to lift it.

Wilmot snaked a hand down and grabbed Digle’s wrist, squeezing. The other man let out a scream as the bone shattered. He fainted with the pain, and then sagged against the other Auror, who held him up easily.

Rufus frowned, but let it go. Yes, Wilmot was violent—it was the reason he’d never advanced—but they’d hired him in spite of that, and sometimes his unusual strength came in handy. “Take him to the cells, Edmund. You’re in charge of guarding him for now.”

“It will be my pleasure,” said Wilmot, baring his teeth.

Rufus looked hard at him.

“Imagine,” Wilmot continued, without missing a beat. “Drawing a wand on the Minister.”

That didn’t seem to be the reason he’d broken Digle’s arm, but Rufus let that go, too. I can’t sack someone just for being odd. “Quite,” he said, and then turned back to the business of deciding what to do about the more difficult business of his office, while Wilmot dragged Digle off to the cells, whistling a merry tune.

Rufus wished his life were that uncomplicated.

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Harry rolled his eyes. His correspondence with the Burkes and the Belvilles wasn’t going well.

He sat in a room near the stairs up to the Owlery, biting the end of his quill until the feather went damp and matted between his teeth. The letter on the desk in front of him had gone no further than the salutation. Harry wasn’t yet sure how to answer the delicate mixture of praise and threats he’d got from Compton Belville. When Harry had told him rather sharply that, yes, he did plan on allying with Muggleborns, Compton had apologized, but then asked for several magical artifacts in return for his family’s alliance with Harry. All of the artifacts were Dark Arts ones mostly used in torture, though Compton had provided “alternative”
uses for them.

The Burkes were, in their way, worse. Their one infallible point remained that they wanted some artifacts from the Black estates, and other families that the Burkes had married into or descended from, but didn’t carry the name of. Adelina Burke had told Harry earnestly that they could bring Ministry records to show that they did have the rights to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, to at least half the land on which Malfoy Manor currently sat, and to the Garden, the Parkinsons’ estate.

“You look deep in thought, Harry. Care to share?”

Harry jumped, sending his letters flying in the wind of his motion, but luckily the semi-permanent Levitation Charm he had around him at all times scooped up the flying papers before they could hit the floor and smudge the ink that already covered them. He turned around and saw Regulus standing in the doorway—well, leaning in the doorway, because Merlin forbid he stand up straight—and smirking at him.

“Regulus.” Harry relaxed. “Snape said that the Ministry was questioning you. Did they finally stop?”

“Finally,” said Regulus, with a roll of his eyes. “I stunned them the first time I appeared, and they were willing to accept, temporarily, that I was who I said I was. Then I guess ‘formerly dead Death Eater’ on the paperwork turned a few heads, and I got hauled in for further questioning. They were most disappointed when I told them that I’d turned my back on Voldemort years ago, and couldn’t tell them anything about his current activities.”

“Did they treat you badly? Did they—“

“No, no,” Regulus soothed him. “Just asked every question they could think of, and got me tangled up in all the paperwork they could think of. But I’m free and clear now. They know I’m a Black, that I’m loyal to you, and that I’m the legal heir to all the Black estates and properties.” Abruptly, he grinned, and strode across the room to catch Harry in a hug. “Severus told me that you did something fairly spectacular yesterday. I’m sorry to have missed it.”

“I didn’t like having to do it,” Harry said softly, leaning against Regulus and floating the quill across the room so that he could hug back without getting spit on Regulus’s robes. “But if she shows loyalty, then I can give her back her magic little by little.” He’d granted Henrietta permission to use many small spells and charms—Lumos, for example, and medical magic—but the Dark Arts only in self-defense. He’d made her Old Blood, in a way, an idea he’d had after talking with Paton. He didn’t want his allies able to kill her, but, on the other hand, he could hardly leave her free to simply curse them, either.

“I think you did the right thing.” Regulus’s hand ran soothingly through his hair, still holding him close. Then the sound of a second voice, behind him and also coming from the doorway, startled Harry again.

“When were you going to tell him I was here, Regulus? Honestly, are all Blacks born to be selfish?”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat, and he pulled away from Regulus to peer around him. “Peter?”

Peter Pettigrew smiled at him. He looked far different from the way that Harry remembered him looking, even a year ago when Harry had freed him of the last shreds of the phoenix web. His blue eyes might have shadows in them, but they could shine with light on the surface. His robes were perfectly neat and clean, and he’d lost the starveling thinness that remained from Azkaban, and there was no beard on his chin.

“Hello, Harry,” he said, and held out his arms, and Harry went to him and held him in stunned silence.

“Don’t tell me,” he said, when he had his voice back. “The Ministry was finally satisfied that you were what you said you were, too.”

“Yes,” said Peter calmly. “It took longer for me than for Regulus, of course, because they wanted evidence from me to use in Dumbledore’s trial, and they had to accept that I wasn’t guilty of the crime I’d been convicted of in the first place. At least Regulus never had the bad fortune to actually be arrested,” he said, to Regulus, who grinned at him.

“It’s a matter of skill, Wormtail, not luck.” Regulus sniffed. “If you’d just had the sense to change into your namesake and run when the Aurors first came after you, then you could have come and hidden in Wayhouse with me. Wouldn’t you have liked spending fourteen years as a wooden rat?”

“Spare me,” said Peter.
Harry closed his eyes and grinned, fighting back his own happiness to keep it from overwhelming him. It was really true, then. He could ignore what Peter had said about giving evidence for Dumbledore’s trial in the flood of joy. There was one thing that bothered him, though, and built until he had to break through Regulus’s and Peter’s banter.

“Where are you going to live?” he asked, drawing back and looking up at Peter. “Do you need money? A house? I can—“

“Harry Potter, taking care of the wizarding world one stray rat at a time,” Regulus intoned, and then laughed at him. “Honestly, Harry, did you think I’d bring him here and make you do that? He’s going to stay with me. We were just going to get settled—in Cobley-by-the-Sea, I think, since it’s the most comfortable. That’s part of the reason we’re here. I wanted you to see the place that you’re going to inherit someday, and Peter wanted to talk to you.”

Harry scowled. “Regulus, I told you, I’m not going to be the Black heir.”

“That’s all right,” said Regulus. “Quite all right, really.” He reached into his robe pocket and pulled out a great sheaf of paperwork, waving it at Harry. “These are the forms that I need to sign to make someone not of the Black blood, or sympathetic with my magic, a legal heir. It’ll take months to get through them all and make sure I haven’t forgotten a signature or a binding seal. By that time, maybe you’ll be more used to the idea, hmmm?”

Harry just rolled his eyes. Let him waste his time, then. It’s not going to do him any good in the end.

“I don’t think I can go to Cobley-by-the-Sea,” he said instead, and nodded to the letters floating in obedience behind the desk. “I have important letters to write to my allies.”

“Well, no—“

“Then come with us,” said Regulus insistently. “Both of us haven’t seen you to talk to in far too long.”

Well, that was true, at least. Harry looked from one face to the other and gave in. He did want to speak with them, if only to make sure they were all right, and he could use a bit of relaxation away from the letters. Maybe some hours of not thinking about them would knock something loose.

“Let me just speak with Snape,” he said.

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“Beautiful, aren’t they?”

Harry had to blink back tears as he nodded. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected of Cobley-by-the-Sea—a larger Grimmauld Place, perhaps, with fewer crooning portraits and no magical singing beasts and more dust.

It wasn’t like that at all. The house was built into the side of a cliff in Cornwall, and the very first thing that Harry had heard when they Apparated in was the sound of the Atlantic Ocean, falling and singing and surging hard enough to make the stone around them shake. It wasn’t the North Sea that lay off the coast of the beach where he’d celebrated Midsummer, but it was water, and the sound had had the power to relax him since at least the time he’d gone swimming with the unicorns.

Everything was made of stone, and covered with sea-patterns. It had taken Harry wandering through three libraries in a row to realize that the pictures were continuous, not from one room to another but from one kind of room to another. The sitting rooms contained scenes that looked like they could come from the building of the house. The libraries had a visual history of an alliance between wizards and merfolk. A war with those same merfolk marched in spirals like a maelstrom over the walls, ceilings, and floors of the kitchens. Harry could have spent hours just trying to read and decipher them all, but Regulus had tugged him insistently through the house, aiming for the lowest level, promising Harry all the while that he’d see something remarkable.

And so he did. The lowest level of the house was composed of caves—or maybe of rooms carved out of the backs of caves, with rock turned transparent so that one could see through into the wild waters beyond. Harry truly wasn’t sure if the glassy material in front of him was enchanted rock or pure magic.

When he’d first seen the creatures the caves held, he’d protested to Regulus, “But they don’t live around Britain!”

Regulus had nodded slyly at the water. “Tell that to them.”
And, Harry had to admit, the hippocampi frolicking in the waves didn’t seem to give a fig for what Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them said. They continued swimming and playing around each other, snaring weeds and fish out of the water to eat, drifting with their tails curled in sleep, cradling their tadfoals close to them so they could feed. They had fish tails from the waist down, like merfolk, but their heads and forequarters were those of horses. The horses’ coats were green, though, or perhaps blue; it was hard to tell in the subtly tinted magical light that filled the cave and allowed Harry to see them. Their manes streamed languorously in the currents, and their hooves weren’t true hooves, spreading out in small fins that enabled them to stroke the water more efficiently. Harry caught a glimpse of two tadfoals chasing each other, and could see that their eyes were large and gleaming, opaline.

“How long have they lived here?” he whispered, more to the hippocampi than Regulus, as if they could answer him. “Did your ancestors breed them?”

“No,” said Regulus. “And they didn’t try to tame them or kill them and sell them, either, which I must admit is surprising when you consider some of my ancestors. They’ve always been content to watch them. Maybe they were just too beautiful.”

Harry nodded, unable to speak. The hippocampi bore no web, it had been one of the first things he looked for. This was what magical creatures should look like in their natural state, unfettered, content, looking as if they had never known fear.

“Wouldn’t you like to live in a place like this, Harry?” Regulus asked, leaning on the glassy rock and forcing Harry, reluctantly, to pay attention to him. “Somewhere you could watch water-horses, and take delight in them? Perhaps relax after your vates activities?”

Harry looked back at the water, and a mare cupping her fins around her foal, without answering for a moment. The prospect was infinitely more tempting than it’d been an hour ago, that was for sure.

But in the end, he had to shake his head again.

“Why?” Regulus asked. “I’ve had some time to think, Harry, and I don’t believe you anymore about not valuing the Black legacy. It might be something you’d never ask for for yourself, but you’re responsible. You would cherish and love these places and these things if I gave them into your hands; I know you would. And you’d use them well, which is definitely something I can’t say for most of my family. So. Why?”

Harry took a deep breath and turned his back on the hippocampi, leaning on the glassy rock, too. “You’re not going to like it.”

Regulus gave him a quiet smile. Peter had agreed to wait upstairs for them—probably, Harry thought now, so that Regulus could have a chance to speak in private with Harry. Without him around, there wasn’t the banter, though Regulus’s voice was still light when he said, “A month at the Ministry and fifteen years as a toy have taught me to get used to lots of things I don’t like, Harry. I’ll survive.”

He really won’t like it. Harry rubbed his palm on his robes and decided to forge ahead. “Because I feel like it’s too much,” he said quietly. “Just—too much. So, it’s connected to what I told you before. Too many possessions. Too much of everything.”

“You don’t feel like you deserve it,” said Regulus, the same way he had before.

Harry gritted his teeth. “Yes. If you must put it that way, then yes!” His voice rose into a shout on the last words before he could stop himself. He turned away in embarrassed silence, and managed to relax the pressure on his teeth at last. He leaned his forehead on the glass and watched two tadfoals knock each other silly with their tails.

“I don’t think it’s incomprehensible, Harry,” Regulus told the back of his head. “And I don’t hate your answer. On the other hand, I do think this is a relic of something you haven’t faced fully yet. Gifts embarrass you. Why?”

“Please, don’t,” Harry whispered, and closed his eyes.

“Please, tell me.” Regulus’s voice was soft and earnest. “I’m not asking for you to tell me anything else, Harry, and I’m certainly not asking you to accept being made my heir yet. Just the answer to this one question. I know what my version of your answer is, but I’m sure it’ll pale besides yours. Please?”

The wistful ring of his voice made Harry squeeze his eyes shut until they hurt. Then he said, to get it over with, “Because it implies too much belonging, too much notice. Gifts are things you give out of gratitude or pleasure or because you like a person or to settle a debt. I can accept that last one. Not the others.”
“Why?” Regulus whispered again.

Harry tensed his shoulders unhappily. But this much pressure brought to bear on a specific point wasn’t something he could resist, and he had the trust to think that Regulus wouldn’t repeat this conversation to anyone else, not even Snape. “I don’t want to be noticed. I hate it. And I—“ Oh, Merlin. Can I say this? “The only family I’ve ever wanted to belong to was my own.”

He felt Regulus embrace him. He felt tears swarming and struggling beneath the surface, and the urge to keep talking, just tell Regulus how badly he wanted to belong somewhere, anywhere, but how it was tangled up with the notion that the only true belonging he would ever have was back at Godric’s Hollow with Lily and James and Connor, and how much he hated his parents, with a strength that frightened him, for that longing when he thought about it in too much depth.

But that would mean spilling all his emotions about his parents, because all his emotions were linked, and one hatred would drag forth others, ones Harry didn’t want to admit he had, because he wanted to be able to forgive them, and how could he forgive them if he loathed them with a fury like a storm rising at sea? At least, if he kept those feelings private, then he didn’t have to look up and see the knowledge reflected in another person’s eyes.

He used the Occlumency pools to swallow the emotions, one by one, until he felt calmer. He opened his eyes, and looked to the side, past Regulus, and saw Peter frozen with one foot on the steps coming down from the upper part of the house, caught in the doorway just as he had been at Hogwarts.

His face wasn’t etched with pity, which Harry thought he couldn’t have taken, but compassion. And his eyes looked straight into Harry’s, and he saw far too much. Harry wrenched free of Regulus and walked over to a different part of the glassy wall to watch the hippocampi again. He regulated his breathing, counted in Mermish, and used the other tricks that Lily had taught him to keep going when he was in the middle of a war-zone. It shouldn’t be this hard. He shouldn’t have this much time keeping himself to himself. He had to be strong, with the trial coming up, and Lily and James both needing all the strength he could give in the fight to save them from execution.

This was why I didn’t want to look at my emotions, he thought. It’ll only dredge the depths and bring up all sorts of wet and nasty things, not bright and shining fish. There’s so much—Yes, he could admit it, since no one else could hear his thoughts. There’s so much that’s ugly in my feelings for my parents. I don’t want them to see.

He hadn’t finished completely sitting on his feelings when Peter said, “Actually, Harry, this is connected to what I’d like to talk to you about. I know the Seers invited you to the Sanctuary for the summer. Obviously, circumstances made it impossible for you to go. But they’ve renewed the invitation for you over the Christmas holidays. If you could—”

“No.” Stars, no.

“Will you tell me why?” Peter sounded as gentle as Regulus had, and Harry wondered if they’d taken lessons from each other.

“I don’t want them to see me.” It was an efficient answer. Harry watched the tadfoals swirl around each other, doing a dance with tails linked, and shuddered at the thought of a Seer looking at him now.

He had, Merlin knew why, imagined that all of himself was the same forgiveness and belief in freedom and protective instincts that Vera had described to him when she saw him last year. But when he thought too deeply about his emotions, he was looking straight into the face of hatred, and anger, and even a vengeful instinct that he’d felt in flashes before, but was getting a full dose of now, as the trial drew closer. A quick temper was permissible, barely, if it led to him defending the rights of others. But the wash of emotion he’d felt after Bellatrix took his hand had still managed to kill Dragonsbane. Harry had thought he only hated Bellatrix and Voldemort. It was a shock to find that part of him hated James and Lily, too.

Everyone was always encouraging him to talk about his feelings, to be honest, to let them see his real emotions.

And what would they think if they could see them? They’d be horrified. Hell, I’m horrified. Harry shook his head. No. I can’t release them for the same reason I can’t just let my magic run wild. They’re in me. I’ve acknowledged them. Great. Now they can go away again.

This was the reason he wasn’t going to testify under Veritaserum in the trial, though once he’d thought he would. Along with the desire to save and protect his parents that would come out in his answers to the Wizengamot’s questions would come his contradictory desires to hurt them and see them condemned. And if the Wizengamot heard about those, unless all the members were more strongly influenced by Dumbledore’s spell than Harry thought possible a few weeks afterward, then he could bid hope for his parents’ freedom, either from death or Tullianum, farewell.
In, out, in, out, he coaxed his breathing. He thought he managed to look and sound normal by the time he turned around and smiled at Peter.

“No, thank you,” he said softly. “I’m glad to have you back again, Peter, but I won’t be going to the Sanctuary.”

They spoke to him quietly for a short time more, but seeing him adamant on the subjects they’d brought him there to address, they gave in and showed him other things about Coblery-by-the-Sea. Harry relaxed by degrees, and even managed to study the house with a great deal of pleasure. He still thought Regulus’s children, if he had any, should inherit it, or failing that Narcissa and Draco, or Andromeda and Tonks, but he could admire it. There was no law against that.

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“Harry.”

Harry blinked and almost walked right back out of the bedroom. Draco was standing beside his bed with a strange look in his eyes. The only expression Harry could compare it to was the look he’d worn the night Harry had taken the Blood Whip Curse. (Luckily, Draco still hadn’t taken revenge on Marietta, because Madam Pomfrey still could not figure out how to Transfigure her back).

“What?” he asked.

“Come here.”

Harry swallowed and glanced sideways, for once hoping that Blaise would be in his bed to save him. But if Blaise was there, he had up a Silencing Charm, and one to hold his curtains closed, and another one to make even the subtlest telltale signs of his presence unnoticeable.

Reluctantly, he walked up to Draco and looked down at the bed. Something that looked like a Pensieve stood there; in fact, Harry supposed it was a Pensive. But the liquid that filled it was gold instead of silver.

Harry looked up at Draco, and quickly away. The intent stare in his eyes was simply too much, after the good hard look Harry had been forced to take at himself earlier that day in Coblery. “What is this, Draco?” He hoped for his voice to be steady, and it wasn’t. Damn.

Draco gently cupped his chin and turned his face back around, stooping and kissing him with great intensity. Harry closed his eyes and yielded. It did feel good, and, as ashamed as he was to admit it, he felt like he needed it after the confusion of emotions that he’d felt earlier.

Draco backed off and said, “It’s a spell I invented. I did it just the way you said. I wanted it to happen, needed it to happen, and it did. Please, Harry, look into it.”

Harry swallowed, and bowed his head, and slid his face into the golden liquid of the Pensieve.

He flipped over twice, the way he might when entering a normal memory, and found himself watching himself. It was a memory of breakfast this morning, when he’d apparently eaten in an abstracted manner, staring at the wall all the while. Harry couldn’t imagine why Draco had found it interesting enough to record.

Then he realized that, although he could see Draco sitting beside him and watching him, he wasn’t himself, free to observe the memory and see whatever happened more objectively than either person involved could have. He felt as if he were Draco. Ordinary Pensieves didn’t compel the observer to share a particular viewer’s mindset. This one did.

And it wasn’t just an awareness of his mind, either, like the things Harry saw when he used Legilimency on someone else. This was an absolute immersion into—

Into what Draco felt, and thought, about him, Harry realized.

He knew, for one wrenching moment, what it felt like to impatiently crave and want physical affection, not fear it as a terrible thing. He knew what uncomplicated anger at his parents felt like, the utter hatred Draco had at them for having cramped and twisted Harry’s mind. He knew what right and wrong were in matters of abuse to most of the rest of the world, and he knew the pride of someone who had grown up in a loving family and was at the moment fervently grateful for it, and he knew what it felt
like for someone to love him.

For just one moment, Harry had to see himself as identical to other people in the capacity to be loved and seen, and, in Draco’s eyes at least, a great deal more important.

Then the moment shattered.

Harry yanked his head out of the Pensieve, all his nerves afire. He shuddered, the more so when he felt Draco’s hand come down on his shoulder.

“I told you that I was going to push, Harry,” Draco said softly into his ear. “This is one of those times. Now you know what I feel for you. You’ve had the chance to see the world through my eyes. Will you allow me to see it through yours? I would like that.” He toyed gently with Harry’s hair, and Harry, knowing exactly what Draco wanted to do with him and why, was amazed that he had consented to wait so long already, even if the very notion of feeling that good made him freeze, himself. “And perhaps it will help me to be more patient,” Draco added, as though reading his mind, “because, believe me, there are times I’m a second away from just hauling you into one of those abandoned classrooms we use for the dueling club and not leaving until we’ve both broken through every single bit of your conditioning that remains.”

Harry swallowed, and swallowed again. Today was a day of unexpected emotional revelations, it seemed.

And here was another one. If there was a part of him that could hate his parents, and it could exist side by side with the part of him that loved and wanted to forgive them, there was a part of him that reached greedily for what Draco was offering, even as his training came down like a cage around it.

Harry wanted. He hadn’t known he could want that strongly, that there was anything of it in him at all.

He was a second away from doing as Draco asked and lowering his own mindset into the Pensieve.

And then he remembered what Draco would see if he looked right now. All that hatred, all that anger, that Harry wasn’t nearly as perfect as he pretended to be. Shame flooded him, pouring like a fall of gravel across his emotions, making them all the same color and papering over the cracks.


He kept his head bowed, but Draco grasped his chin and tilted it up. He was frowning, but lightly, more as if he were trying to understand than as if he blamed Harry.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered.

And Harry experienced that same overwhelming urge to tell someone that he’d felt around Regulus and Peter, only ten times worse, because it was Draco, and there was a real chance that the urge would break around his strongest resolutions. He hunched unhappily. Yes, yes, he wanted someone else to know, he could admit that, but what price would easing his own soul carry? Forcing someone else into horror and terror of him, just so that he could feel a bit better?

When he’d remolded his mind, Harry had left spots along the steel skeleton for the new emotions to grow like leaves. He was wondering now if that had been a mistake. What if he didn’t want some of those emotions that other people thought of as normal? What if he should have trimmed off those leaves, because the depth of what he felt could be dangerous, given his magic?

He certainly hadn’t thought that he would ever grow the emotions towards his parents that other people expected him to feel.

“I’m sorry,” he answered Draco, when he’d wrestled down the immediate temptation to speak. “I can’t tell you yet.”

Draco leaned forward and kissed him one more time, then withdrew with a small nod and picked up the Pensieve. “After the trial, then. I hope you hold to that, Harry.” He gave him a faint smile, and slid out of the bedroom.

Harry made his way to his own bed and spelled the curtains tightly shut enough that not even Fawkes, Argutus, or the Many snake, whom he’d left behind again, could get in. He just wanted to be alone for a while, to rebuild his shields and constrain his emotions and try to breathe.

Five more days. I can get through this. I can. And I can help insure that my parents aren’t executed, and free them if I can, without exploding into some stupid fit of tears or rage. I can. They’ll be doomed if the Wizengamot sees what I feel about them.
Intermission: Where Only Love Can Carry Her

The first time Pansy knew how someone else was going to die was the day before the trial of Harry’s parents.

She was hurrying towards the Great Hall, since she’d awakened slightly late for breakfast. She passed a Hufflepuff first-year at the top of the stairs from the dungeons, also heading towards breakfast, yawning and rubbing at her eyes.

Pansy turned her head, and her eyes skimmed over the girl’s face. And then she couldn’t be uninterested any more, because she saw shards of wood decorating her, and saw the blood, and her heart thumped in mad fear as the knowledge tucked itself inside her head, as undeniable at this point as her knowledge of the alphabet.

The girl would join her House’s Quidditch team, and die in a fall from her broom when she was seventeen.

Pansy took a deep breath, and realized the girl was staring at her. She shook her head and hurried on. For a moment, she’d nearly yielded to the temptation to gasp or shriek aloud in shock, and of course she couldn’t do that.

She’d stepped further into necromancy on Halloween night. After that, she’d finally had to give up going with her left arm bared, though the rest of the Slytherins still did. She had to hide her body behind the wraps, except for her hands. It was necessary, to distance herself from the physical world around her and step into the world of spirits. Pansy had known that as surely as she had known that she couldn’t let hatred of Harry drive her any further into this study.

It had to be love, passion for working with the dead, and nothing else.

Pansy had spent hours kneeling in a rune circle Halloween night, before she finally wrestled her way through the conflicting impulses and realized that hatred for what had happened to Dragonsbane hadn’t been her primary motivator for a while now, if it ever was. She really did love the dead. She really did want to follow her father. And as the new knowledge came flooding in, she knew she couldn’t blame Harry for his death.

Death was an honor. Death was the supreme moment of communion with life, in fact, the moment when the necromancer tasted it for the last time before leaving it and becoming one with the dead. Harry had been part of her father’s death, and Pansy should have questioned him about it earlier, so that she could know more about what it felt like for the necromancer involved.

Luckily, he was one of her Speakers, so she still could. She had given up talking to everyone else now.

She slid into place at the Slytherin table, and Millicent nodded to her. Pansy kept her eyes on her oatmeal, not sure that she wanted to look up and see how her friend was going to die.

“Pansy? Are you all right?”

It has to be faced. It must be faced. Pansy reminded herself of that, and lifted her head, gaze locking on Millicent’s face.

She relaxed. Millicent was going to die at a decent age, nearly a hundred, in fact, in the arms of her third husband. Pansy snickered into her hands in sheer relief, and Millicent’s face both eased and tightened.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” she demanded.

Pansy nodded, and then turned back to her oatmeal. Her gaze moved out across the Great Hall as she did so. She had made the hardest decision on Halloween. She had known that necromancers had to see the deaths of other wizards and witches, and never tell anyone about them. She had the example of her father to show her the immense courage that living with such a thing took. Pansy was no Gryffindor, but she had accepted this burden, so she had to live with it.

She saw the bright spots of illness, the grayness of age, the visions of accidents amazing or mundane. There was quite a lot of blood, and the motionless green flashes of Avada Kedavra. Pansy winced. It seemed that many of her classmates, and some of the teachers, were going to die in the War.

But she didn’t feel the temptation, any more, to tell anyone of what she had seen. She nodded at each death, if not physically, then inside her head, and her tension eased, and her determination grew. What necromancers saw was inevitable, unlike what Seers who predicted the future said; it could not be changed, or manipulated, or turned aside. It happened. Pansy closed her eyes.
It’s no wonder that necromancers are forbidden to speak of it. It’s a sacrifice so the dead will trust us, but it’s also something the living would never want to know. They hate death. They don’t understand. They’d question, want to know the utmost limit of their days, and then blame us for telling them. They’d live lives bounded by their ends, instead of in that glorious uncertainty.

Pansy ate her breakfast. It was Wednesday, and she had History of Magic, always a boring class. If she didn’t fortify herself with food enough to become sleepy, then she was likely to start talking to one of the half-formed ghosts that hovered in the castle, and everyone but the Slytherins in the class would become hysterical.

She’d finished most of what she could eat when she saw a trio of people come through the doors of the Great Hall. Pansy glanced up at them.

Her breath caught. They were Harry, Draco, and Harry’s brother, and as she watched, Potter peeled off from the other two and went towards the Gryffindor table. Harry and Draco proceeded on towards the Slytherin one, conducting an argument that was low-voiced until Harry snapped something and pulled away from Draco, walking the rest of the distance alone. His face was white with strain. Pansy wasn’t surprised, given that his parents’ trial began tomorrow.

But it was the vision she had seen as she watched the three of them together that was overwhelming her.

I want to tell them.

But that would break her vows, and even if she could still talk to Millicent and Harry, she couldn’t tell them about her visions. Pansy tried to lower her eyes back to her plate and forget what she’d seen.

She couldn’t.

She watched Harry and Draco as they settled into place—still next to each other, for all their arguing. Harry ignored Draco entirely as he piled sausages on his plate and started eating, though the bright hive cobra around his neck and the Omen snake on his shoulder both seemed as willing to eat from Draco’s hand as Harry’s. Meanwhile, Draco went right on staring at Harry.

Pansy managed to eat a bit more, but the food was harsh ashes in her mouth. She rose at last and left, her garments moving about her in directions that the wind of her speed couldn’t account for. The ghosts were beginning to catch hold of her and play with her clothes, since she was partially in the everyday, sunlit world and partially in theirs.

She leaned against the wall of the first floor corridor and closed her eyes. She had a few minutes before History of Magic began.

I don’t even know what a vision like that means.

But she knew that she did, and that last protest was just the instinctive bleat of a child trying to get out of something difficult.

Pansy straightened, took a deep breath, and turned towards class. She would keep her vows. She would not tell Harry, or Draco, or even Potter, who would surely get the vision wrong even if he tried to repeat it to the others.

She would hold straight and true to her course.

The knowledge and vision of her own death had also come to her on Halloween night, and she had spent some time in tears. If she could overcome that, she could overcome anything she saw for anyone else.

~*~*~*~*

WARNING: Chapters 40-46 contain things that could cause severe emotional upset. Also, Chapters 41-43, and Chapter 46, contain memories of child abuse. Please be cautious if you think this may be triggering for you.

Other than that, here we go, as the trial begins.

Chapter Forty: Descent and Dissent

Harry woke on the morning of November sixteenth to a cold slap on his cheek.

He blinked, half-expecting that Draco had opened the curtains and used a cold washcloth to hit him. Then he realized that the creature sitting on the pillow beside his face and staring at him was not Fawkes, though they were the same size and looked superficially similar, and sat up quickly.
The red-eyed bird opened its fanged jaws and laughed at him. It was just drawing back one talon, with which it’d stitched another pattern of icy cuts on Harry’s right cheek. Harry lifted his fingers to them, and found them already freezing over. The bird moved its lizard-like tail as if that pleased it.

No one can see me but you, but everyone can see them. They are a mark. I feel like marking you. You acknowledge me too little.

Harry stared at the bird instead of attacking. If it had come through the wards on Hogwarts and the charms he used to guard his bed every night, then he doubted there was much he could do to hurt it. Besides, now he felt some sense of familiarity from the vicious, laughing voice.

It felt like his magic had, the summer after second year when it was just free from the phoenix web and surreptitiously trying to murder his parents—just as angry, and just as vicious.

“What are you?” he whispered. “Are you the magic of a powerful wizard trapped somewhere?”

The bird flexed its clawed wings and stalked towards him. Harry kept staring at it, watching it come, but called up his wandless magic when it got too close. The bird didn’t seem frightened. It just paused, its head cocked to one side in a listening attitude. Then it hissed and folded its wings. If I must be tied to someone else, it said, seeming to drop the words into his mind, I suppose you are not the worst choice. At least you are powerful. Then it uttered another hiss, a mocking one, as though the idea amused it terribly.

“Tied?” Harry thought of his bond with Fawkes, but even he could not imagine that this thing was anything like a phoenix, accustomed as he was by now to trying to see beyond the surfaces of dangerous magical creatures. “What do you mean? Are you actually bonded to me, then?”

The bird-creature lashed its tail, which coiled around Harry’s wrist with a sting like frostbite. Harry shook his hand free, and all the while, the thing’s scarlet eyes considered him.

I am tied, said the creature at last. Against my will, since you forget about me so often. But things will fall out as they will. It may be that the tie will be severed at last, and I need not worry about you. Or it may be that I will find my home with you. It hissed again, and the teeth snapped an inch short of Harry’s face; he’d jerked his head back just in time to prevent it taking an ear. A poor home that would be, and yet I would not mind it when the time came.

“You’re making no sense,” Harry told it, trying to keep his voice low. He wasn’t sure if the soothing tone he’d used with magical creatures would work on one that seemed to be made of magic, but he might as well try it. “I can help you, if you’ll just tell me what you mean.”

You can’t help me. You’re as much a victim of this tie as I am, as he is, as all of us are. The bird-creature extended its wings and leaped up, hovering. We must wait for things to fall. Perhaps you will be pierced. I would like that.

It swooped at Harry, who ducked. When he looked up again, the creature had faded from sight entirely, just as it had when he met it in the sky above the Quidditch Pitch. At least he had some idea of why, now. If the creature was made of pure magic, then it could vanish at will. The body it wore was only a temporary construct, anyway, like the box that had imprisoned Harry’s emotions in second year.

But when he tried to imagine why the creature would choose to appear as a bird, or who might have sent it, he wound up blank. He was bound to so many different people with so many different kinds of vows and alliance promises. It could be that one of his allies secretly resented him, or there might be someone bound alive and suffering whom Harry wasn’t even aware of. The sentient nature of the magic would argue that, at least. Harry’s own magic had gained intelligence only when it was tamped down by the phoenix web and prevented from having its freedom; it had become part of him when it was fully, and finally, freed.

The only thing Harry could find to be thankful for in all this was that he had seen the bird before he bound Henrietta, so he knew it couldn’t be her.

He touched the icy scabs on his cheek and closed his eyes, concentrating. He had studied a little more medical magic since the Woodhouse battle and the Blood Whip Curse, especially these last few days, when any distraction from the impending—thing—was welcome. He murmured the word “Integro,” and felt the ice melt, as it had when Madam Pomfrey had healed the first set of cuts. Harry had the feeling she hadn’t accepted his words about running into a tree as he flew too low on his broom, but at least these would just look like normal scabs now. In time, they would fade, and, if they followed the example of the first set of cuts, not leave scars behind.
“Harry? Are you all right?”

*Does Draco have a set of senses attuned to my use of healing magic?* Harry rolled his eyes as the curtains got yanked back. “Odd cut, but other than that, fine,” he said dismissively, and climbed out of bed.

Draco followed him to the loo in silence. Harry ignored him, even though he knew that Draco had, like Harry, been excused attending his classes today so that he could go to the trial.

*The trial.*

Harry shivered, and tried to ignore the nervous flutter in his stomach. Today might be the only day of the trial, or it might cover several. It would depend on how many witnesses the prosecution called—though Harry wanted to think otherwise, he could not pretend to himself that the defense would be able to call many—what the Wizengamot had already seen, who believed what, and on other factors that Harry could not estimate or predict.

He did know that he would testify first, for neither prosecution nor defense, and that his information, though in theory purely factual, would also carry an emotional tone. That emotional tone might play a large part in condemning or saving his parents.

Harry felt his breath speed up. He ducked under the shower and let a flood of cold water sluice the back of his neck to try and calm himself down.

*So you carry the responsibility for their lives in your hand. You’ve done that before, as when you planned the Woodhouse attack. You can do it now. If their future happiness is a small glass ball that must not be shattered, then you’ll just have to make sure that you don’t shatter it.*

And that brought him into the realm of things he could control, estimate, and predict. Harry used his magic to run down to the roots of his hair while he considered his weapons.

*Occlumency, of course. Slide all the inconvenient emotions into the pools, and leave the ones that might spare their lives near the top. If the Wizengamot sees only that you feel sorrow about their arrest and indifference to the events of your childhood, then you might well succeed in convincing them that the abuse wasn’t that bad. How could it be, if it didn’t leave that much of a mark?*

*Manipulation. You won’t be testifying under Veritaserum. You can manipulate and lead the questions, respond in such a way that they ask you things you want to answer and not things you don’t.*

*Sympathy and forgiveness. Repeat those as often as you can. Make them the theme of your arguments. And draw the Wizengamot’s sympathy in the direction you want it to flow.*

Harry had promised that he would not use his magic to force the issue, that he would not compel or coerce anyone to believe him. And he wouldn’t. That was still true. But he had said nothing about testifying the way that Snape and Draco wanted him to, either. This was a battle, and he could not be certain of winning.

But he would struggle with all the weapons at his disposal. And this was a battle he *intended* to win, for all the good that would do him. Freedom for his parents might be a distant goal, but life need not be, even if it was a life spent in Tullianum Prison.

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As they went down to breakfast, Harry opened his Occlumency pools and began sliding the inconvenient emotions in.

First went all the tangled mess of his contradictory hatred and love, of course. He would leave only such gentle, fond affection near the surface as might convince the Wizengamot that, yes, he cared a bit for his parents. They wouldn’t understand if they saw the violence of his love. After all, as Harry could now parrot from numerous books on the subject, abused children weren’t supposed to love their parents.

Well, he did. But they wouldn’t see that. So away it went, and Harry summoned up an emotion as gentle and calm and pure as milk, and distributed it in a floating river over the surface of his mind.

Then he submerged the grief. He could not weep about the past during the trial. He would see the past, face it, but he could not weep over it. And he would see his parents, and he could not crack when he faced them, either. He drowned his sorrow deep, and attached stones to it so it couldn’t rise again without a great deal of effort on his part.
He was trying to decide how much of his desire to see his parents free he should leave above the surface when Pansy sat down next to him and whispered, “Harry?”

Harry turned and looked at her, startled that she’d decided to address him by his first name, or indeed at all. Save when she wanted him to speak for her during classes, she’d been growing more and more silent the past few weeks, and sometimes used sign language before any words, as if she were forgetting how to speak aloud. He could see her eyes now, hazel like her mother’s, staring at him intently from the depths of her hood.

“Yes?” he asked.

Pansy bit her lip, then said, “I wanted to tell you that I understand, now. I saw the vision of my own death on Halloween.” She gave a deep shudder, and then said, “I understand that my father didn’t perish in some ill-advised attempt to save you. He knew exactly what he was doing. Mother told me that, but I didn’t know it. So, if you were still worrying about that, please know that I forgive you.”

Harry blinked, and did feel a small grief in him ease. He hadn’t done a great deal of thinking lately about Pansy, but at least she wasn’t giving him extra stress and strain to carry into the trial. He nodded. “Thank you.”

Pansy nodded one more time, paused as if she would say something, then stood and glided from the Great Hall. Harry watched her, for a moment thoroughly distracted from his own preoccupations.

She’s been carrying the knowledge of her own death for two weeks? And others’ deaths, too? From what little Harry knew of necromancy, Halloween was the usual night for the initiation of the deeper sacrifices, and Walpurgis the night when a necromancer would complete all of them and finish his or her training. Harry didn’t think Pansy could finish her training by the next Walpurgis, but she’d certainly gone further than he thought.

“Harry.”

Harry jumped, and looked sideways to meet Draco’s eyes. That was a mistake, and he knew it almost the moment he looked, but then he found himself unable to turn away. Draco gently slid a bowl of porridge in front of him.

“You weren’t eating,” he whispered.

Harry shrugged free of his strange preoccupation and picked up his spoon. “Pansy had to tell me something,” he murmured.

Draco just nodded. Then he said, “I’ll be right there for you, Harry, you know, if you need to lean on someone.” He paused suggestively. “Or if you want to talk to me.”

Harry said nothing. It was true that he hadn’t mentioned the trial for the past few days, and snapped at Draco to stop every time he’d tried to bring the topic up. It was also true that he wasn’t sorry for that. He’d had to dance a delicate dance. He couldn’t lose control, but, on the other hand, if he’d started sinking his emotions into the Occlumency pools too early, then Draco or Snape would have noticed something was wrong and pressed more strongly.

He turned his eyes back to the porridge and started again on the emotional immersion. When he went into the courtroom, he would be calm. He was not a Lord, and he didn’t intend to interfere in Scrimgeour’s Ministry. He could lift his hand and just command his parents’ chains to fly off, but he wouldn’t. He would just try as hard as he could to triumph.

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“Are you ready?”

Narcissa glanced up from her dressing table and smiled at him in the mirror as she fastened her earrings into place. “Really, Lucius. Intruding into a pureblood woman’s bedroom before she finishes putting on her jewelry, and without even an endearment! Have you no manners at all?”

Lucius lingered in the doorway for a moment, watching his wife. Narcissa’s long, pale fingers moved swiftly over the earrings, simple golden ornaments that wouldn’t look like anything impressive to a quick glance. At more than quick glance would reveal them as scarab beetles. They would come alive at a command from Narcissa, animating to attack the genitals of an opponent.

Her blonde hair was wound up on her head today, revealing a long white neck that would probably distract attention from the golden torque coiled at her throat. That torque was a Black artifact, a snake with its tail in its mouth. It could also come to life at a quiet word, and stretch its jaws wide enough to eat someone alive.
Her dress shimmered red with small golden threads tucked here and there. Lucius wondered how many in the courtroom would recognize it as a battle-gown, not magical in and of itself, but declaring Narcissa’s solemn intent to start a blood-feud with the Wizengamot members if justice didn’t fall out and the Potter parents were freed.

“Going armed, my dear?” he asked.

“Yes.” Narcissa’s eyes met his in the mirror, and there was no humor at all in them. “You know why.”

Lucius nodded, and entered, sliding his arms around her waist. Narcissa leaned back against him as she slipped her wand down her sleeve, then turned and gave him a fierce, hungry kiss that made Lucius wish they didn’t have a trial to attend.

He looked at himself in the mirror, studying the edges of his face. It remained the perfect, cool mask he needed, though. He nodded. “We should leave,” he said, and, stepping back, offered his wife his arm.

Uncharacteristically, she didn’t take it. She stared into his eyes instead, and said, “How badly do you think it will turn out?”

Lucius sighed. Narcissa spoke of more than one thing. “The trial should go as well as can be expected,” he murmured. The Daily Prophet had been carrying reports of Albus Dumbledore’s mind-compelling spell for the past two weeks, and most wizards and witches Lucius knew were shocked and angry, even if they hadn’t paid much attention to the trial before. And there was the endless evidence on the side of the prosecution. “About the other matter—”

“I think we should tell Harry,” Narcissa interrupted.

Lucius frowned. “Not yet, Narcissa. The name of Yaxley will mean little to him until he meets her in battle. And you know the reason we held off. Our Potter will have little chance of concentrating on anything else with the trial proceeding. When it is done, and his parents safely gone, either in Tullianum or to death, then we can tell him, and warn him about her.”

Narcissa bit her lip, but, at last, yielded to his advice as she had for the past week, and took his arm. Lucius guided her towards the door of the Manor. They would be Apparating to London once they were past the outer wards, then approaching the Ministry on foot. The recent Death Eater activity had the Department of Magical Law Enforcement paranoid about anyone coming closer than that by Apparition, not that Lucius could blame them.

As they walked, his mind ran grimly on news he’d never thought to hear. It was true that, during the First War, the Dark Lord had had a Yaxley Death Eater. But that one hadn’t gone to Azkaban, and Lucius had assumed, at most, that he would rejoin Voldemort when the Dark Lord arose again. One more Death Eater wand was not much of a concern.

Instead of simply torturing Yaxley for not showing him loyalty during the years he was gone, however, Voldemort had done something worse: called in a debt of honor to the entire family. There was no Dark pureblood family more obsessed with honor than Yaxley. They’d put themselves at Voldemort’s service.

And he’d chosen to take Indigena Yaxley, the Thorn Bitch, into his service.

That was bad. It was very bad. Indigena was what Bellatrix Lestrange might have been if she were sane and ten times more dangerous.

Lucius knew that he had to tell their Potter the Thorn Bitch was a Death Eater, but it would only put more pressure on him now. Let it lie, until the trial is done.

He didn’t want to acknowledge how close he thought Harry was to breaking.

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Augustus Starrise added the final bell, and stepped away from his mirror with a nod that made the bells sway in his hair. There. Now he looked like a war wizard capable of killing someone.

Not a bad entrance to his first political activity in more than a year, if he did say so himself.

He whirled away from the mirror, hearing the bells ring softly around him, and picked up his wand and his staff, which was carved with white oak and banded with gold. It pulsed gently in his hand as he spun it. Augustus felt a smile curve his lips as he ran his fingers over the end of the staff. He knew it was a wistful, too-gentle smile, but that was all right. There was no one in the
Alba had helped him add the final band of gold to the staff, a few days before the Death Eaters took her. Her loving presence, and some of her magic, lingered in it still. Augustus closed his eyes, and imagined his twin sister standing before him, as tall as death and twice as lovely.

“Perhaps soon, Alba,” he whispered, “you’ll have your justice. I know it must pain you, looking down on the world, seeing your murderers go unpunished and one of your sons run wild. But I think this plan should work.”

A knock sounded on the door. Augustus smoothed his face stern, and then opened it. It was Pharos, of course, his nephew and heir, Alba’s younger boy, bowing nervously to his uncle.

“It’s time to go?” he murmured. Augustus nodded in approval. Though Pharos still had trouble controlling his expression—and he was such an openhearted, honest young man, _that_ was no surprise—his voice was cool and calm.

“It is,” said Augustus, and swept towards the Portkey room of his house. The portraits on the walls, showing past Starrises in dignified stances, nodded and sometimes bowed to him, depending on how much reverence they felt for the current head of the family. The windows blazed, open on the sunlight of a perfectly beautiful fall day. Augustus was glad the Potters’ trial was occurring after October, so that he might attend it without fear of the Sunset Accords lopping off one of his limbs.

He could admit it: he’d felt chagrin last year when Scrimgeour had forced him out of the Ministry’s arena, and again when Fudge was deposed, and again when he realized how Tybalt had run to Potter’s side. But time had sleeted past him and mellowed his opposition, and then had come the news of Potter’s abuse, and then Augustus had realized what an opportunity he had.

Several things had changed his mind on allying with the Potter boy. The first was the fact that he _was_ powerful, and not completely lost to Dark magic. If he were Dark, Tybalt wouldn’t have allied with him. Merlin knew the boy had gone wrong, but not that far wrong. He was no Death Eater, nor any other species of cringing follower to crouch at a Dark Lord’s feet. So Potter must have some spark of Light in him, and Augustus might encourage that to grow if he did join the alliance.

The second was the news of the abuse. Augustus’s hand tightened on the staff as he thought about it. That was sickening, the news of what the Potters had done to their own son. And James Potter came from a Light family, too. Augustus was hoping the Ministry would follow the ancient custom of allowing the whole crowd at the trial to spit on the condemned—for he had no doubt that James Potter would be condemned, as he deserved to be. Surely someone had spoken to Scrimgeour about that already, reminded him of the importance of tradition?

The third thing was the realization of just how many former Death Eaters Potter had gathered around him. Augustus loathed the thought of working beside them, but not so much the thought of fighting beside them.

And there was always the chance that he might find Alba’s murderers among them, or learn information that would lead him to the guilty parties among those Death Eaters who’d stayed Death Eaters.

Augustus planned to make formal submission to Potter and offer him the assistance of the Starrise family coffers the moment the trial was done.

He _did_ hope he would get to spit on James Potter first, though.

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“Are you all right?”

Hawthorn started and turned around. Keen though her ears had been since Greyback had bitten her, Lupin had been a werewolf longer, and could still move with a silence that baffled all her attempts to hear him. “Fine,” she said shortly.

Lupin looked at her with calm amber eyes. “You shouldn’t try to lie to a packmate,” he said quietly.

Hawthorn turned to face the wall again and didn’t respond. She was already regretting her decision to accept Lupin’s invitation and Portkey in to his quarters today before the trial began. It was too small a room to hold two werewolves, one of whom was upset.

“Harry will not hate you for testifying against his parents,” Lupin told her back. “You do realize that, don’t you?”
“And why shouldn’t he?” Grateful, in a way, not to have to hide her emotions any longer, Hawthorn swung around and showed him her teeth, wishing she could lay her ears flat to her head. Wolfish gestures of anger were just so much more satisfying, somehow. “I know all about the memories, and I have to do it, but you know as well as I do that he wants his parents to go free.”

Lupin’s eyes shifted more towards amber. Hawthorn knew from his scent that he wasn’t angry at her, though.

“There was a time when I would have agreed with him,” said Lupin softly. “Before I knew about—all this. Now, I wish they would let James and Lily out in a wooded park where our pack might hunt them.”

A shocked laugh escaped Hawthorn’s lips before she could stop it. Then she rubbed her hand over her face. “Thank you,” she said.

Lupin took a step nearer and rubbed his chin against her cheek. “Pack should cheer each other up,” he said. “I wish we could go to Claudia right now, but that would only raise her cousin’s suspicions. Perhaps we can get one of her other cousins to owl her for us, and arrange a meeting where we might run together?”

“Perhaps,” said Hawthorn. She knew the suspicious Griffinsnest family, though, and didn’t think it would work. Claudia had managed to keep her lycanthropy a secret from everyone but her parents, who’d been present when she was bitten and decided to support her. Meeting with at least one known and obvious werewolf—Lupin’s signs were more obvious than others’, if you knew what you were looking for, since he’d been bitten so young—would expose her irreversibly to her relatives.

Hawthorn would have thought the precautious acceptable, last year. This one, she felt more and more anger towards the wizards and witches who treated werewolves like beasts, even though she had been one of them until her first full moon.

The feelings combined and melded with her more personal worries over Harry. If he broke during the trial, then Hawthorn could only imagine how long it might take him to recover, and what his enemies would do in the meanwhile. She’d heard rumblings of factions in the Ministry getting ready to push for tougher anti-werewolf laws.

“We’ll survive this,” said Lupin. “And he will. He may even free us, be our vates, too, who knows?” He lifted his arms and tucked them around her shoulders.

Hawthorn leaned into the embrace, and nodded, and tried not to think of the look she’d seen on Harry’s face that morning when she observed him from behind a glamour in the Great Hall.

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Harry dropped out of Apparition and glanced around once. He’d come with Draco, Snape, Regulus, and Peter to a designated Apparition point within a half mile of the Ministry, in a London alley most Muggles didn’t pay much attention to. They didn’t have far to walk.

Draco clung close to Harry’s side as they stepped into the open, in the perfect position for Harry to lean on him if he needed to. Harry rolled his eyes. He was fine, with his Occlumency pools burying his emotions. The stares Snape and Regulus kept giving him were overkill. Peter, luckily, seemed to be keeping his eyes to himself.

Harry managed to relax a bit as they made their way to the deserted telephone box that would let them into the Ministry. There was no reason to be nervous. Only a few Muggles were around, and a simple Distraction Charm made each of them consider the wizards as nothing important.

They passed a second alley, and then Harry caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, at the same moment as the Many snake coiled around his throat, whom he hadn’t been able to leave behind this time, uttered a sharp hiss.

Harry swung around, in time to see a vaguely familiar man step out of the alley and aim his wand straight at Draco.
“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry heard Mulciber’s voice from last year drumming in his head. ...no shield, no barrier can block the Killing Curse...

Harry turned sideways, wrapped his arms around Draco’s waist, and bore him, spinning, to the ground. The Killing Curse sped over both their heads and chipped a bit of stone from a building. Harry heard a few Muggles gasp, but the Distraction Charm still seemed to be working.

That meant, though, that the attacker could go after the Muggles, and they wouldn’t do anything to defend themselves.

Harry rolled away from Draco, though Draco was trying to cling to him, and rose hastily to his feet. Now he did recognize the man stalking towards him with a mad look in his eyes. It was Kingsley Shacklebolt, one of the Aurors who had questioned Harry when he’d taken Snape as his guardian in third year, and the first Auror to be sacked when Scrimgeour took office.

His eyes held a fanatic’s fire, and Harry had no doubt that this desperate strike had come about because of his loyalty to Dumbledore.

Harry drew in a deep breath. “It’s all right, Kingsley,” he said, keeping his voice low and soothing, edging in front of Draco. “This trial is for my parents, not the Headmaster. If you could just—”

Kingsley swung his wand to orient on Snape. Harry could see the consequences that would follow like a catch of the Snitch in his mind’s eye. Either Snape would die, or he himself would use the Killing Curse, and be lucky if he wasn’t sent to Tullianum for wielding an Unforgivable.

Harry held out his hand. “Accio Kingsley’s wand!”

The wand sped towards him, luckily before Kingsley could fire a Killing Curse. Harry had just started to breathe a sigh of relief when he saw Kingsley drawing another wand, and felt the deadness of the one in his hand.

This one was a blank wand, specially made for the task of killing. Kingsley still held his own.

Harry flung the blank wand down, and then Kingsley was pointing his own wand straight at him.

“Avada Kedavra,” he said softly, and the blast of green fire that couldn’t be stopped or turned aside came at Harry.

Harry rolled under it. He had to hope that Draco hadn’t been just behind him, or Peter. He could see Regulus at Snape’s shoulder, his own wand drawn, but he didn’t know where the other two were.

No one cried out, but that didn’t mean anything. The Killing Curse could strike too fast to leave someone time for a death scream. Harry didn’t trust his own senses until he scrambled to his feet and turned, seeing no body behind him.

He faced Kingsley again as Snape cast a Blasting Curse. It bounced neatly off Kingsley’s cloak. Harry felt his own face tighten. Kingsley’s clothes were strengthened with a powerful Shield Charm, then.

He had to do something before one of the people he loved died or decided to use the Killing Curse. He was not losing Regulus, Peter, or Snape to Tullianum, damnit! He was close enough to that with his own parents.

He saw a small flash of movement crossing the ground between him and Kingsley, and then the former Auror shrieked and kicked. Harry saw a gray rat clinging fiercely to his ankle, biting for all he was worth. Peter had done that to Dumbledore once, too, to save Harry from his anger.

It gave Harry time to decide what to do. The Muggles were staring at them, now, the ones who hadn’t fled screaming. The Ministry would undoubtedly be here in a moment—this close, wards could sense use of the Unforgivables—but Harry couldn’t depend on them being in time to save everyone.

And now Kingsley was aiming his wand at Peter, the distance so close that Harry knew he wouldn’t be able to put anything in between, as if anything would stop the Killing Curse but another body.

The thought passed fleetingly across his mind and was gone. No. He’d survived the green fire from Voldemort, but that was a unique occurrence that wouldn’t happen again.
He didn’t think he could use Legilimency on Kingsley without eye contact, and the Shield Charm’s strength was unknown, and Harry didn’t want to use Dark Arts this close to the Ministry.

That left Light spells that would take Kingsley out.

“Incito cordiem,” he murmured.

The spell reached into Kingsley’s chest, past the cloak, like the spells that Rosier had used on Harry which burned his blood or his heart. This was an incantation that Harry had heard of before, but never cast. He was hoping desperately that it would work.

It seemed to. He could feel Kingsley’s heartbeat in his ears beside his own, and it began to quicken as he listened, pumping blood more and more frantically, going faster and faster.

Kingsley’s wand fell from his hand. Peter scampered to safety. Kingsley knelt, shuddering, arms wrapped around himself, and Harry heard the heart pick up speed.

He knew this spell could kill someone. Force the heart to beat fast enough, and it would burst. Harry didn’t want that to happen. He wanted to hand Kingsley over to the Aurors he could hear Apparating in.

“Finite Incantatem,” he said, and then watched as Kingsley scurried for his wand again. This time, though, an Auror bound his hands, which swung free of the cloak, with a silvery rope, and others stepped in to remove the cloak and then capture him in a Body-Bind. Harry let out a long sigh and turned to check on the others.

Peter was staying a rat for the moment, obviously unwilling to transform back in front of the Aurors. Harry had doubts, then, that the Ministry’s questioning had actually revealed Peter as an unregistered Animagus. Regulus and Snape were staring at Kingsley with similarly frozen expressions that said he should be glad he was in Ministry custody. Draco was hurrying up to Harry.

“Are you all right?” he whispered, wrapping him in a tight hug.

“Of course,” said Harry with a murmur, hugging him back, though he kept his eyes on Kingsley.

The attack had had an odd effect on him. Of course he’d been horribly afraid that the Killing Curse would hit someone before he could stop Kingsley, and he’d been worried about what spell he would use, but it was as though this had forced him past the last stresses and strains dangling in his mind, and forced him to ignore whatever of his own anger and hatred remained outside the Occlumency pools.

It’s best for everyone concerned when no one has to die. And when someone attacks like this, because of misguided loyalty, it’s more pitiful than anything else. The same thing happened to my parents. They’re ultimately pathetic.

If I can stop Kingsley like this, shouldn’t I be able to spare my parents death? It shouldn’t be that hard, and this first part of the trial all depends on me. Harry felt himself relax further. Yes, I can do this.

“Mr. Potter?” Harry glanced up, and saw an Auror he didn’t know standing over him, frowning. “My name is Auror Wilmot. I’ll be escorting you the rest of the way to the Ministry.”

Harry nodded, and turned to walk in the Auror’s custody, trusting the rest of them, or other Ministry people, to take care of Kingsley and the Muggles. His mind was still clear, as though he’d taken a great gulp of fresh air.

I can do this. I don’t know what I was worried about. Let’s go. He felt a genuine smile widening across his face. Even seeing my parents shouldn’t be hard when I’m feeling this good.

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Chapter Forty-One: Reap the Whirlwind

This was interesting. More interesting than she’d expected it to be, actually.

Indigena Yaxley moved with the crowd flowing into the Wizengamot courtroom, nodding and smiling at everyone who paused to look at her. It was always easier to be friendly as Iris Raymonds than as herself. She felt as if she really were a new person whenever the plants beneath her skin flexed, reshaping her features into those of another witch. She carried another wand, too, and the Ministry officials had kindly registered that and given it back to her. Her real wand was carried, unregistered, in her robe.
They hadn’t checked for it. There were wands up that were supposed to make entering with an unregistered wand impossible, and none of the officials had any reason to be suspicious of the pretty young witch who flushed when her fingers accidentally brushed someone else’s hand.

The yew leaves wrapped around Indigena’s real wand kept the wards from functioning. It wasn’t really their fault that they didn’t know that.

The thing that made her visit to the courtroom interesting was the other people, though, not the tiresome Ministry officials. Indigena paused when she first stepped inside, looking around. She sniffed, and smiled. Here, away from her new Lord—the scent of whose magic was rather overwhelming—she could actually smell the different kinds of power the other wizards carried with them.

She was the most powerful wizard in the room, though she knew that would change when Potter entered. And she hadn’t been sure, either, that she’d be more powerful than Severus Snape, the traitorous Death Eater who’d assigned himself Potter’s guardian. It was a pleasure to find that she was, if barely.

Indigena made her way lazily towards the visitors’ galleries. It didn’t matter where she sat. Her new Lord had ordered her to keep an eye on Potter’s trial and report anything interesting, but the true information would come from his words, as it did in any trial, not his face. Indigena didn’t have to see him.

“Excuse me.”

Indigena had turned her head backwards to study a witch with an unusual rose perfume a few steps behind her, and had stumbled into someone without meaning to. She turned around and gave a small shake of her head. “The apology should be mine,” she murmured. She knew her face wouldn’t show recognition. The plants were not very flexible, and when they reshaped her into Iris, Indigena only let them express emotions that she thought she might need, so as not to overstrain the vines. Feral pleasure at the sight of the Malfoys wasn’t one of those feelings.

Lucius Malfoy nodded at her, as though to say that, yes, she should apologize, and then guided his wife up the steps. Indigena eyed them as they glided past her. Narcissa’s white hand dangled within an inch of hers for a few moments, as the Malfoys had to pause to let more spectators flow past them. Indigena could reach out and grip it.

And the thorny rose she wore wrapped around her wrist could animate, digging its spines into Narcissa’s palm and pumping in a few drops of poison that would hurt no more than a hard pinch and leave no mark. She’d be dead in a few hours.

Indigena would have done it, too—she believed in slaying one’s enemies, not toying with them—but Lord Voldemort had claimed the right of killing all traitors, and he had promised Bellatrix Lestrange that she could have Narcissa. Indigena knew the requirements of honor perfectly well, since it was what had made her a Death Eater in the first place. She could not take a kill someone else had marked as his or her own.

She would have, instead, to enjoy the knowledge that death had come within an inch of Narcissa Malfoy today, and she had never realized it.

Indigena climbed to her seat in a silent, thoughtful mood, but only until she remembered her experimental thorns. Then she smiled. She could entertain herself until the trial began by thinking about how big they would soon grow, how much poison they were likely to store, and whether Evan Rosier was in very much pain right now as he writhed on them, pierced through the back and abdomen.

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Harry lifted his head as he entered the courtroom. There was definitely an advantage to having been here before, though neither of the occasions he’d been inside it—for Fudge’s trial, and for Snape’s—was very pleasant. He had at least expected the bare stone walls, and the flickering torches, and the staring crowd, and the chair with chains in the center.

Of course, since he wasn’t a criminal being tried but a “victim,” as they insisted on calling him, the Wizengamot had conjured another chair for him. This sat not far from the one with chains, still almost in the center of the room, but it was lower and had a cushion on it. Harry took his seat.

He leaned back and tilted his head to meet the eyes of the staring Wizengamot, and the eyes from the visitors’ galleries. He hadn’t
realized there would be quite so many people. Of course, with the *Prophet* and other newspapers having covered the story in breathless anticipation for so many months, interest would be high when the time for his parents’ sentencing finally came.

Harry curled his lip. *They think they’re here to see me weeping and breaking down, the helpless child they’ve portrayed in all their articles. Well, I’m not going to. Even if I have to make myself look completely unsympathetic, I’m not going to break down.*

He knew Snape and Draco, the Malfoys and his other allies, were up there somewhere. He knew they probably hoped, though for a different reason from the rest of the crowd, that he wouldn’t maintain his mask. Harry intended to disappoint them, too.

“Attention,” said a quavering voice enhanced by *Sonorus* charms. “Attention, wizards, witches, and gentlebeings. If you will sit down, please?”

Harry lifted his head to look at the old wizard standing near the front of the Wizengamot’s platform, shuffling some papers in front of him. Harry didn’t know him. He was extremely small, with barely any wisps of hair clinging to his head, and he wore a pince-nez. Harry nodded. *They probably couldn’t find anyone else to lead the questioning. Most of the Wizengamot were either against me or too closely connected with me, and of course Scrimgeour can’t lead it himself. I suppose this one is neutral.*

“My name is Tofty Sapientian,” announced the old wizard. “I am an Elder of the Wizengamot, and I will lead the portion of the trial that consists of Mr. Potter’s questioning.” Harry could feel his eyebrows rise. *They’re not having the same person lead it all the way through? That’s unusual.* “Please, sit down and be quiet. There must be no interruptions while we proceed.”

Harry relaxed a bit. So far, Mr. Sapientian sounded just like all the books of proceedings on child abuse trials Harry had read. He might not be the questioner all the time, but while he was, it seemed likely that he would be fussy and adhere to strict rules. That was just the kind of person Harry would want questioning him.

“A warning,” said Sapientian, and stared in the direction of a pair of witches who wouldn’t stop gossiping. When they finally stopped, he gave them a nod and continued. “Some of the memories discussed in this courtroom today will be extremely hurtful. Please depart now if you feel unable to hold the contents of your temper, your wand, or your stomach. Once we begin, the door will be locked, and no one will be permitted to leave until Mr. Potter’s testimony is complete.”

Harry listened, but it didn’t sound as though anyone were leaving. Of course, the observers would have come here today knowing it was a child abuse case.

“Very well,” said Sapientian, and spoke the spell that would lock the courtroom’s doors. Harry shivered, but tried not to let the echoing boom get to him. He wouldn’t feel trapped. The spell wasn’t locking him in here with the past; it was locking him in here with the future. This was his chance to get as much for his parents as he could obtain.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry leaned a little further back in the chair and looked up again. He noticed the chair molding itself to his head, so that he wouldn’t hurt his neck continually craning it to see. He made a mental note to thank whoever had constructed the chair like that, if he ever found out.

Sapientian’s voice was gentle. “Please let me know at any time if you are unwilling to speak. It is our intent today to learn the truth, but nor our intent to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Too late for that. *Snape already did it by spreading the news to the papers.* But Harry checked his bitterness. It might escape him during the trial, and that would be utterly disastrous. He nodded, instead, to show he understood.

“Now, I must ask: Are you willing to testify under Veritaserum?!”

Harry shook his head. He knew the question was procedural only—very few child abuse victims chose the truth potion—but he did feel a brief, fleeting regret. If he could have convinced them that what he felt was true beyond a doubt…

But he would convince them that *everything* he felt was true beyond a doubt, and that was the problem with that. Harry shoved his anger down again and waited patiently for the first question.

Tofty Sapientian looked at his notes for a moment, then took a deep breath and said, “Mr. Potter, please describe the way Lily and James Potter, your parents, raised you.”

Harry relaxed further. This was the kind of open question that gave him a lot of room to play in, the kind he’d been hoping for.
“Guardedly,” he said. “We lived in a small house near Godric’s Hollow, behind tight isolation wards, from the time my twin brother Connor Potter and I were one and a half to the day we started Hogwarts. The isolation wards were constructed out of fear of Voldemort—” a collective flinch from the court, which Harry thought would get tiresome soon “—returning, and his Death Eaters seeking revenge. My parents, of course, feared for Connor’s life, and so, in addition to keeping him protected from the outside world, they trained me to be his defender.”

Sapientian moved on to the next question. “Is it true that you had no choice in becoming his guardian, Mr. Potter?”

Harry kept the scowl off his face. Though they weren’t leading the questioning, other members of the Wizengamot and the Minister would have had the chance to make up questions. He would bet anything that that particular one came from Scrimgeour, or maybe Madam Marchbanks.

“It is true that my training began very young, from the night that Voldemort attacked,” he said, and rolled his eyes as more people flinched. It’s a name. If they’re that afraid of his name, of his shadow, how are they ever going to fight him?

Sapientian frowned slightly. “That’s not what the question asked, Mr. Potter.”

Harry spread his arms. “I was raised to believe in it,” he said simply. “Many wizarding parents raise their children to believe in many different things, Elder Sapientian. Pureblood purity, for instance, or the need to keep our world safe and secret from Muggles, or the superiority of one Quidditch team over another.” That got a chuckle from some people in the galleries, but they echoed in a mostly confused silence; Harry knew he wasn’t reacting the way most of the spectators had expected him to. “In most cases, from the time they can talk, or not much after it. Would you describe them as not having a choice? I had the same lack of choice as they did, or the same freedom. I was raised in a certain way. That way made me what I am. Do I wish that my parents had chosen some different methods? Undoubtedly.” He released just a bit of his anger from the Occlumency pools then, to flavor his voice. It wouldn’t do to let them think he was emotionless about this. “But I cannot say I am sorry for everything I learned.”

“Describe your training in detail for the court, Mr. Potter.”

Another wide-open question. I do like Sapientian.

“I was raised to be my brother’s guardian,” said Harry. “To stay in the shadows while defending him; I was to present an ordinary front to the world, and never let anyone know that I was skilled in doing what I was. I expected I would lay down my life for him someday. There was a War coming, and my mother told me the Boy-Who-Lived had to survive to fight the Dark Lord. To do that, he needed his love and innocence intact. I was the one who would stand between Connor and the world, and I promised to do it.”

He could see a few of the Wizengamot members exchanging glances. Harry hid a smile. Good. It’s all in the way I present things. Snape got them on his side by twisting everything around. He can’t blame me for doing the same thing.

Sapientian rustled through another series of notes. Then he made a soft sound and said, “Ah! Mr. Potter, I am now going to lift a memory from the Pensieve that was turned over to me and place it in the air above the courtroom. Don’t worry,” he hastened to add. “Only yourself and the Wizengamot members will be able to see it.”

Harry tipped his head, and watched as Sapientian put his wand in a shallow bowl in front of him and then flicked it up, causing a spray of silvery droplets to animate and take form in the air above his head. Harry could see people from the galleries craning their necks, and heard many groans of disappointment. He ignored them, and watched as his mother and his younger self came into view, kneeling together in the fall of sunshine through a window. Lily had her hands clasped around his. Harry thought, from the look of his face, that he was six or so.

“A new morning,” Lily whispered to him, with that intensity Harry had always loved. It made him feel they were playing a special secret game together, practicing an art that no one else in the whole world knew about. He shifted in the chair, emotions he hadn’t felt in years returning to him. If he had managed to keep everything secret, if he had followed Connor into Gryffindor, then perhaps he could still have felt that, that intense and hidden pride that would have let him stand in a corner and not be noticed.

I’m allowed to regret it, he thought defensively.

“A new day,” the Lily in the image continued to the Harry in the image. “So many possibilities for renewal and rebirth. Can you recite your vows for me, Harry? I’d like to hear them renewed.”

Image-Harry nodded and began to say them. Harry mouthed them along with him. The words were still so ingrained in his head
that, though it had been years since he’d recited them daily, he knew them like the beat of his heart.

“To keep Connor safe. To always protect him. To insure that he lives as untroubled a life as he can, until he has to face Lord Voldemort again.” The little breath in the middle, that Harry thought signaled his mother’s fear, and then they continued. “To be his brother and his friend and his guardian. To love him. To never compete with him, never show him up, and never let anyone else know that I’m so close to him. To be ordinary, so that he can be extraordinary.”

The image dissolved. Harry blinked and glanced up at Sapientian. He had thought the Wizengamot would choose something more injurious to his parents’ cause than just something he’d done every day.

Sapientian’s voice shook as he spoke. Harry didn’t know why. “Are all those vows true, Mr. Potter? You kept them all?”

Harry shrugged. “I attempted to keep them all. They were disrupted my first year at Hogwarts, when I was Sorted into Slytherin House, which my mother hadn’t planned on.” More words were burning on his tongue, about Snape and how he’d forced Harry to do various things that broke the vow of ordinariness, but he refrained. Say those things, and they’d just think he was still damaged.

“But—“ Sapientian paused a moment, as if he were trying to think of how to phrase the next question. Harry was surprised. Isn’t he just reading off a prepared list? Merlin! Why is it always those last two that bother everyone? Harry nodded. “Yes. Every one of them.”

“And how did you feel about this?”

Harry felt for traps in the question. “At what age, sir?” he asked finally.

“At the age you made them.” Sapientian nodded jerkily at thin air, as though he’d forgotten he’d dismissed the image. “At the age you were in the Pensieve.”

Harry shrugged. “I welcomed them, sir. I believed in them absolutely. I knew that someone paying attention to me could mean that I wouldn’t be as effective a guardian to Connor. Either the Death Eaters might see me as an enemy, and then I wouldn’t be able to surprise them, or I might get dragged into friendships and alliances and other commitments that had nothing to do with my brother. Of course, now I realize that’s wrong,” he added, barely resisting the temptation to make his voice a sing-song.

“So you were to be focused on your brother absolutely?” Sapientian asked, his voice so soft that for a moment Harry thought he would have to ask him to repeat the question. “He was to be your life?”

“Yes,” said Harry. He felt uneasiness rising up his back, tickling at his spine. He thought he’d lost control of the conversation, but he wasn’t sure how. He swallowed and leaned back on the chair, then sat forward again, then forced himself to stay still. He didn’t want to look either as if he were taking a defensive posture nor as if he were squirming in his seat.

“Why?” Sapientian whispered. “What could possibly have been worth this?”

“A prophecy,” said Harry. “A prophecy that marked my brother as the savior, and his elder twin brother as his powerful guardian. My parents were raising me, as they thought, in tune with the strict guidelines of fate. If my brother wasn’t guarded, then he would have fallen.”

“What did the prophecy say?”

Dread thickened Harry’s throat like wine. He couldn’t let the full knowledge of the prophecy out into the world, not when Voldemort might learn of it. “I never heard the full wording, sir,” he lied. “I only know that that was the reasoning my parents gave, and so did Albus Dumbledore. None of them ever said anything to make me think they had any other main reason.”

Sapientian sorted through his notes one more time, then frowned and said, “But here is a memory that may prove otherwise.” He flicked his wand through the Pensieve again, and another image took shape.

Harry barely resisted the temptation to snarl. He knew this one. He’d seen it before. It was the memory of the time that Dumbledore had put the phoenix web on him, when he was four years old.

He sat through it in stony silence. He’d hated it the first time he saw it, and he still hated it, but he hated more the purpose it was being used for. He knew what Sapientian was going to ask next.
He realized he had his arms folded when the Wizengamot Elder dismissed the memory and turned back to him. He unfolded them, but made no other gesture. He probably looked too stiff, and his body language was giving him away already. Harry released a frustrated hiss of breath that should be too soft for anyone else to pick up, even with the courtroom’s excellent acoustics. *I can’t believe I’m being knocked down already. What in the world happened to holding strong?*

“This, Mr. Potter,” said Sapientian softly, “looks rather as if your parents and Albus Dumbledore imprisoned your magic because they feared you, and trained you as a sacrifice to make sure that you would never turn on them. They treated you as little more than a thing, a tool.”

Harry bit his lip. To speak now would be to spill words that he didn’t want to say.

“You mentioned that I need only tell you if I was feeling uncomfortable, Elder Sapientian,” he said after a moment. “I am.”

“Do you wish to stop the questioning?” The Elder’s voice was quiet, respectful, and Harry knew that he would if Harry wished it. And Harry almost said yes, but then he remembered: this was the only chance that he would get to influence the court. For the rest of the trial, witnesses for defense and prosecution would speak, but he was neither. Pensieve memories would be shown, and challenges given by biased observers like Snape, with no counterbalance of his explanation.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then I will continue with the questioning,” said Sapientian. “This explanation, of treating you like a tool or a weapon, has been presented to the Wizengamot by those who submitted the memory. Would you agree with it, Mr. Potter? Or would you give a different interpretation?”

Harry closed his eyes. He knew one truth that could make them dismiss that explanation forever. But to reveal himself as the Boy-Who-Lived and Voldemort’s magical heir would be to cast doubts on the truth of the prophecy, and then the Wizengamot would only look more deeply for convoluted reasons as to his mother’s training, when Harry had already told them the true reasoning behind it. She’d been afraid, and she’d thought she was obeying fate and the ethics that Dumbledore had trained her into. That was all, but they would dream up some outlook that made her a criminal mastermind. Harry knew they would.

So give them part of the truth and not the whole thing. You can do that, can’t you?

“I turned out to have several dangerous abilities,” he said simply. “My mother, as you heard from the memory, was frightened by the fact that I often Vanished things. What if I had Vanished my brother, or the house? I was too young to realize that some types of magic should be carefully restricted in use. The phoenix web took some of my abilities away from me until I was ready to use them.”

“And when was that point to have been reached?” Sapientian questioned sternly.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think that my mother or Dumbledore ever mentioned a specific age.”

“But we *did* just hear Dumbledore saying that the web would reweave your mind to its purpose,” Sapientian said. Harry could see his hand shaking as he picked up another piece of paper, but he didn’t think it was from either age or fear. “Is that true?”

“That is what happened,” Harry acknowledged unwillingly. “For a time, my whole mind was shaped as webs. The phoenix web was at the very bottom of them all. I suppose that would count as weaving my mind.”

Sapientian made a small noise that Harry thought meant he was ill. Harry found himself clutching the arm of his chair so hard his hand hurt, and removed it, flexing it slowly open and closed so that his fingers wouldn’t cramp. The Many snake around his throat gave a little wriggle that said she wanted to get down and bite whoever was upsetting Harry. Harry switched to stroking her the moment he thought he’d exercised his fingers enough.

Calmness was my goal when I came in here. *Why am I finding it so hard to attain?*

He was trying a routine of breaths that should smooth the bubbling surface of his Occlumency pools when Sapientian said, “Would you describe the effects of the phoenix web for the court, Mr. Potter?”

Harry twitched. *They aren’t going to like this, either.* But he didn’t think he could lie. At least some of the Pensieve memories would center on the web, and it seemed that Sapientian knew them well, if he’d immediately plucked out one of them to look at.
“It bound my magic,” he said. “It bound my loyalty to my brother. It also made me unaware of itself. It was supposed to remain secret, a last line of defense; mostly, my mother and Dumbledore counted on my conditioning to make me loyal. But certain—events—in my second year brought it up out of the depths of my mind, and after that it broke. It was still focused on my brother, but it gave me pain, headaches mostly, every time I thought too deeply about going against my mother and Dumbledore’s wishes on the matter.”

“It made you into a slave,” Sapientian summarized.

“No!” Harry sat up, frowning. “A slave can’t break free of his confinement. I could. Once I learned about the phoenix web, I managed it.”

“Slavery is not based on whether one can break one’s own chains, Mr. Potter,” said the Elder.

Harry sat back and thought rebelliously on whether they would consider house elves and goblins to be enslaved for that reason, and what the reaction of the court would be if he asked that. But he checked the impulse. He was not about to reveal secrets or debase his work as vates by comparing what had happened to him for a decade to the years and years of suffering endured by the house elves and goblins.

Control yourself, damn it!

Harry lifted his eyes back to Sapientian and said, “I’m ready for the next question, sir.”

“There are many mentions in the court’s notes of your being trained as a sacrifice, Mr. Potter,” said Sapientian, shuffling through some more of the papers. “You’ve described a few of the consequences for us. What were others?”

Harry let out a little shuddering breath. He could do this, right? He had acknowledged that the sacrificial training hindered him as much as it helped him, that it was wrong. And if he could just pick the right words and make the Wizengamot see that it wasn’t all bad, then he might stand a chance of lessening their hatred towards his mother.

“I was trained to give up my life for my brother if necessary,” he said. “Leap in front of curses for him, but that was only the most obvious way. Make sure that I had no friends that came before him, or indeed any at all. That would have been the best-case scenario. No amusements that would detract from his position in my life. No concerns that could displace him from always hovering in front of my eyes.”

“I understand that you both play Quidditch on the school teams in Hogwarts, Mr. Potter,” said Sapientian. “How does that work, if you were trained not to compete with your brother in anything?”

Harry could have kissed the Elder for asking a question like that. He relaxed completely as he replied, “Obviously I’ve overcome some of my training, Elder, haven’t I? I can compete with Connor now, and it doesn’t bother me.”

“But in the first years?” Sapientian pushed.

Harry hesitated. Then he said, “I made attempts to give the Quidditch victories to my brother.”

“When did that change?”

“In third year,” said Harry.

“And what happened then?”

How can I go into this, without revealing what happened to Sirius? “I would prefer not to answer that question, Elder.”

Sapientian nodded, and Harry could see the shadows of other nodding heads moving behind him. Too late, he realized he should have answered the question in such a way as would leave key details of Sirius’s madness and possession out. With his refusal, they just thought that he wanted to skip the details of his healing, as if he were ashamed of them.

Sapientian continued before Harry could object. “I understand that your mother’s abuse of you was primarily mental and emotional, Mr. Potter, and your father’s abuse of you primarily neglectful?”

“It was all mental and emotional,” Harry said sharply, “and all neglect on my father’s part.” I don’t want them thinking otherwise, and damn Sapientian for trying to do that, anyway. Skeeter said neglect and mental abuse weren’t as common in the wizarding
world. That means that there’s the chance the Wizengamot won’t take this as seriously, and will downplay the punishment for my parents’ crimes.

“And yet…” said Sapientian, and then waved his wand. Another image took form. Harry recognized this one. He stood in front of a cleared space on the wall, where a bookshelf would normally rest. He didn’t want to chance missing and hurting the books if his spell went wrong.

Harry watched as his younger self intoned the incantation for the Blood Whip Curse, and the stripes formed on his back, cutting the same thin lines that he’d healed when Marietta used the spell. His younger self bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, but resisted the temptation to cry out, mastering and riding the pain. Lily, of course, had told him it was always all right to scream under torture, because lost pride was worth less than lost life or limbs, but it had been a matter of pride for Harry to learn to resist pain without much of a pause. If someone used that curse on him in battle, then he needed to be able to accept it and still make his way to Connor’s side.

The image faded. Harry realized his hand was clenched again, and the Many snake had slid from his neck to his arm. He shook his head, and turned his hand back along his arm to pet her. Dimly, he wondered why in the world the Ministry officials on the door hadn’t demanded that he leave her behind in their care. He supposed they might have thought she was just a decorative necklace or band.

“Mr. Potter.” Sapientian’s voice came as if from far away, breaking and booming in on the silence that had filled his ears. “Will you tell the court how old you were in that image?”

Harry remembered. The memories were dangling in his mind, suspended like crystals in a glass of seawater. He took a deep breath. “Seven,” he said.

Loud and angry sounds came from many of the onlookers around him. Harry closed his eyes and lowered his head to bury it against his arm. He knew it was an expression of weakness, but right now he didn’t think that he could stand meeting the eyes that were looking at him.

“So your mother had you inflicting pain curses on yourself at seven years old?” Sapientian demanded.

Harry sat up. He could see now how Sapientian was trying to blur the lines, and he’d already known why. Make the Wizengamot think that it had been physical abuse, and he’d get an arrest more easily. But Harry was determined not to let him get away with that. If his mother was going to be imprisoned, then it had to be for what she’d actually done.

“It was my choice, sir,” he said. “I knew that I needed training in enduring pain. So I chose to go the route of pain curses.”

“Did your mother watch?” Sapientian asked.

“Some of the time,” said Harry. “When the curse was a particularly bloody one, as that one was, she came up with a healing spell when I’d mastered the pain for a few minutes.” He felt an emotion he couldn’t even identify bubbling up in him like boiling water. He closed his eyes and tried to put a lid on it.

He didn’t get the chance, because Sapientian was asking, “Mr. Potter, what would you have done had she encouraged your brother to use such curses on himself?”

“Damn it!” Harry winced when he realized that he’d said that aloud. He tried to hurry on before the stares coming at him could actively pierce him and force him not to continue. “I would have attacked her, of course. You saw my training. You know that she encouraged me to protect my brother.”

“And if she had used such pain curses on another child?”

Harry made a deep, unhappy sound. The boiling emotion had got out of its pot and was flowing about him, making him feel sick and light-headed.

“Mr. Potter?” Sapientian’s voice had lost its steel. “Do you wish to stop?”

And then James and Lily will die.

Harry sat back up and shook his head. “I’m fine, Elder,” he said, even as he knew the pallor of his face and the shake in his voice belied that. “I can do this.”
“Please answer my question, then.” Sapientian was sounding as if he wished he had never asked it, which was at least something, Harry supposed.

“If she had used such pain curses on another child, I would have interfered,” said Harry. “I was taught that only the Dark Lord’s minions did such things. I would have thought that someone was using a glamour to appear as my mother, or perhaps Polyjuice. I knew about such things. I would have bound the offender down until my real mother could appear and reveal herself.”

“So your mother told you histories of the First War, and of You-Know-Who’s torturers?” Sapientian finished, turning another page.

“Yes.” Harry hoped they would follow this subject. He was sure that it was a less dangerous one.

Sapientian nodded. It was only a moment later that Harry realized the motion was more akin to a fishing bird spearing its prey.

“So you would have considered the use of such pain curses on your brother and other children as harm, but not on yourself?”

Harry turned his head away. “I don’t think you really understand, Elder,” he said, with all the calm he could muster.

“Mr. Potter, I wish with all my heart to be wrong about this,” said Sapientian softly. “That is why we give abused children a chance to tell their own stories, because they know many things that none of us will understand, being outside those situations. But, without such speech from you, I am only stating what I see: that your mother taught you to believe yourself the exception to all the rules that normally govern children. You consider others as normal and would protect them from pain, but not yourself. It did not matter what you suffered, so long as it was in the cause of serving your brother. Is this correct?”

Harry knew he was a few inches from vomiting. And, damn it, his Occlumency pools were breaking apart. He just knew that he was going to cry or scream any moment. A particularly vicious rage had linked Sapientian’s words to what Vera had told him last year, that he thought of himself as less than human, and was now suggesting, with a force and clarity Harry had never seen before, that his mother was the source of that attitude, that she was the reason he didn’t think of himself as human, and that that was wrong.

Harry could feel his calmness slipping away, but more, he could sense his commitment to defending his parents slipping away. If the interrogation continued, he thought, with numb horror, he was likely to say evil things about them, things that would prejudice the court against them and confirm his worst fears.

“Elder,” he said, when he thought he had control of his voice. It still wavered and cracked.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can continue,” said Harry. He had to get out of the courtroom, and now. He wasn’t really worried about his anger destroying anyone there, but the rage had gathered its strength, whispering that he had a perfect right to testify against his parents and try to condemn them if he wanted. If he stayed, then the rage would make sure it destroyed Lily and James, not by lashing out with magic, but by speaking with his voice.

“Very well, Mr. Potter.” Sapientian’s voice was filled with respect. It made Harry want to laugh hysterically. Would he respect me if he knew the reason I’m ending the interrogation now? “The doors by which you entered are unlocked now. Please go to them. Ministry Aurors will escort you to your guardian.”

Harry stood up hastily, keeping his head bowed as he strode to the doors. His eyes were blurred, and the Many snake was hissing and sliding up and down his arm, but it was done.

Even if you didn’t save them. Even if, in fact, you’ve condemned them to death with your behavior.

The Auror named Wilmot who’d escorted him into the Ministry was waiting for him. He gently placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder when he would have turned blindly up the wrong corridor, and murmured, “This way, Mr. Potter.”

Harry let himself be guided. He didn’t know what to think of, what to want. When he reached Snape, he knew he wouldn’t have repaired his mask sufficiently. Snape would insist on comforting him, probably talking to him, maybe giving him a sleeping draught. Harry knew that he needed to stay awake and recover, though. They were bringing his parents into the courtroom next. He needed to return and see them.

“You will always have people at your back, Mr. Potter.”
Harry glanced back at Wilmot, thinking that maybe this was a threat, perhaps from Voldemort. He would welcome the distraction of fighting for his life at this point. He thought it was easier for him than what he’d gone through in the courtroom.

But Wilmot was smiling at him, and he reached up and touched his eyes. Harry blinked as he removed the lenses that must have been covering them, and revealed amber eyes under the normal-looking hazel.

“You’re—” Harry whispered.

“A werewolf, yes.” Wilmot kept his voice low and soothing. “One who considers you vates, and who is therefore on your side.” He paused and tilted his head. “I trust that you won’t reveal me.”

Harry shook his head in a daze. He couldn’t imagine how a werewolf had managed to get and keep a Ministry job under Scrimgeour, but there it was. He could hardly betray him. Scrimgeour would sack him immediately. The anti-werewolf laws said that no lycanthrope could hold a paying job.

Wilmot winked at him, and returned the lenses to his eyes. “Someday,” he said, “when all of this is past, I will introduce you to the London werewolves and the other refugees who have formed the packs. All of us think you’re the most interesting thing that’s happened for werewolves in generations, and the best chance.”

Harry nodded. And perhaps Wilmot had known this, and perhaps he hadn’t, but the reminder of the larger life Harry led outside the courtroom was working. He felt as if he were walking more steadily on his feet, and his breathing was calmer.

“Harry.”

And there was Snape, hastening to meet him. Wilmot stepped back with a little bow, and Harry found himself ensconced in Snape’s embrace. It said something about how worried he was, Harry knew, that he was hugging him in front of a complete stranger.

“Come with me,” Snape whispered into Harry’s ear. “I think you need a few hours away from the court, and then—“

“I can’t,” said Harry, yanking at his arms now. “They’re bringing in Lily next.”

Snape stared down at him with fathomless dark eyes. “And do you really think that you’re strong enough to face seeing her?”

Harry turned his head away. “That’s not the point,” he said, knowing his voice sounded as harsh as the croak of a desert bird. “I have to know what she says. I can’t miss a single moment of this trial.”

“How can you say that?” Harry glared at him. “It’s my mental health compared to someone else’s life and freedom we’re talking about.”

“Someone else is always the key,” said Snape, as if he were talking to himself, but he held up his hand went Harry started to protest. “We will go back inside,” he said. “But the moment you start to hurt too badly, Harry, I will remove you from the court. And that is hurting in my estimation, not yours.”

Harry swallowed and began working on his emotions, tucking them away into his Occlumency pools again. He’d failed once. He had no excuse for failing a second time. At the very least, if his mother were going to be condemned, he wanted to be there to act as a witness.

Why couldn’t I have held strong? It would have been so simple. It seemed so simple when I was entering the Ministry.

He carefully ignored the rage that sat in the center of him now like a great crab, and gripped the idea that Lily had made him think of himself as a tool like a revelation. He ignored, even more carefully, the ripples that that idea was sending through him, what old assumptions it was smashing, what holes it was ripping in his defenses that there were just barriers of a special kind between him and other people.

Perhaps, by the end of it, he would see that he did deserve the same kind of consideration as others, and that terrified him for what it would mean.
But he was not going to think about that right now. He walked up to the galleries of the courtroom, Snape’s arm tight and warm around his shoulders, and just as they entered, he saw the Aurors bring his mother out.

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Chapter Forty-Two: Forgive Us Our Virtues

Lily had been gazing out the windows of her cell—which she knew were fake, since the Ministry was underground—for long hours when the Aurors came to fetch her. Currently, the windows showed a lake scene not dissimilar to the one at Hogwarts, lashed with rain. The sky was only cloudy in one place, though. In others, pale autumn or wintry sunlight shone through, licking at the bellies of the clouds with golden tongues and touching Lily’s heart like hope.

She had cried herself to sleep last night, and then she had sat up this morning with a gasp, as she remembered that today was the trial which might end her life. Then she sank back, trembling, against the pillow, and closed her eyes weakly. Her hands clenched and closed convulsively around each other.

But that was this morning. Now was the time just before the Aurors had warned her she was going to be fetched to the courtroom, and Lily had cried herself out, and put herself into a rudimentary state of hope, like the sun shining through the clouds.

A perfunctory knock sounded at the door, accompanying the falling of the wards. “Potter? Come on.”

Lily kept her face as blank as possible as the Aurors came in. Of course they had sent the two who were nastiest to her outside of Mallory herself: Dawlish and Proudfoot. Dawlish had survived Scrimgeour’s purge of the Aurors in spite of his loyalty to Fudge. He apparently loved the Ministry more, and had accustomed himself to the new Minister. And Proudfoot was simply impossible to get along with, as Lily had found. He foamed and snapped even when she was polite to him. He had been a Hufflepuff, and seemed to disdain sacrificing any family member, even if she’d done it for the good of the world.

“On your feet, Potter,” Dawlish said when she didn’t stand up right away, and then nudged her in the back with his wand. He was so efficient, which was the most intolerable thing about him. He acted as if he didn’t care that she might die today. “The Wizengamot’s waiting for you.”

Proudfoot didn’t speak, but gave her the glare he’d perfected over the last few days. Lily tried not to let it get to her as she moved to the door. She did look back one more time, to catch a glimpse of the sunlight out the enchanted windows, and to remember her plan.

Training Harry to value forgiveness as much as they had had been part of Albus’s suggestion to make him the perfect diplomat for Connor. He had to be able to forgive Death Eaters and others whose pasts had been questionable if he wanted to lure Dark families to the side of the Light. And, as Albus had explained to her only once, because of course what they had done was not wrong, the training would also make it easier for Harry to forgive them if someone ever found out about his childhood and tried to convince him that they’d done something terrible.

“He will be incapable of condemning you, Lily, no matter what happens.” Albus’s voice throbbed in her ears, soft and reassuring, as she trod the path to the courtrooms. Dawlish paused along the way to spell fetters onto her wrists, when Proudfoot reminded him to do it. “We need no magical coercion to insure that. Spells can be broken. Psychological patterns take a good deal more effort. He will love you, and forgive you, if you come to the point where everyone else condemns you. You never should—it is my hope that one day everyone will know how we have trained Harry, and honor his contribution to the good of our world—but someone might yet break through the secrecy and think they should interfere with what they don’t understand. No one outside Godric’s Hollow save me can ever truly comprehend what you have gone through, Lily. Should they bring the force of that incomprehension down upon you, do not despair, so long as Harry is still alive. He should come for you. He should free you.”

Lily let those words repeat in her mind over and over, and by the time they reached the courtroom, she had heard them three times, and she believed them as much as she ever had. She waited patiently while the doors swung open, and Dawlish and Proudfoot guided her to the prisoner’s chair. Of course, chains came up at once to circle her arms and legs, and it seemed that Madam Amelia Bones, who’d stared at her coldly the whole time during her initial interrogation, was going to be leading the questioning.

It is all right. Their harsh treatment does not matter. Is Harry here?

Her eyes caught a movement near the door in the visitors’ gallery above, and she smiled slightly as she saw Harry coming in. She would have known her son’s stride anywhere.
As Madam Bones told people to take their places, thanked Dawlish and Proudfoot roughly, and then moved to begin the questioning, Lily settled back. *Harry has magic powerful enough to destroy the courtroom if he wants—certainly powerful enough to break my chains and free me, and keep me safe from anyone who might try to come after me. I need only remind him of that.*

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Harry could see his mother intensely well. He’d created a small window in his palm, as he had before, so that he could view what happened on the floor of the courtroom without craning his neck. Lily was sitting almost comfortably in the chair, her head tilted back so that she could watch the galleries. Harry thought she’d seen him, though he sat far enough behind the balcony railing that that should have been impossible, and Snape’s presence at his side would tend to obscure him even more.

It doesn’t matter. We could always tell each other’s presence in a room. Why should that have changed?

Harry could feel his breath racing in and out of his lungs, and he was almost glad not to have two hands now, or he would be continually wiping one free of sweat. As it was, he settled back in his seat, ignoring the stare Snape fixed on him, and regarded the window in his palm.

Lily looked paler than normal, and the circles under her green eyes were pronounced. Harry swallowed. I don’t think this is about to get any easier for her. He wished he could go down to her, but he didn’t think the Wizengamot would permit him to do so.

Besides, Snape would probably zap him into immobility and force Sleeping Draughts down his throat if he tried anything like that.

“Lily Evans Potter.” Madam Bones’s voice trembled with disgust as she spoke. Harry wondered why they had to have her lead the questioning. Why not someone else? The thought that Madam Bones was the least prejudiced person on the Wizengamot where this case was concerned hurt, and made his hopes for his parents’ future sink lower. “You are on trial for the abuse of your son Harry Potter, mentally and emotionally, and, indirectly, through magic. Do you deny the charges?”

“I do,” Harry heard his mother’s voice say, strong and lovely and prouder than he would have thought it could be. She sounded as if she were speaking the way she had once spoken to him of war and sacrifice, but this time the whole world could hear. She might finally have an audience worthy of the grand truths she was speaking, Harry thought. Yes, what she had done about those truths was wrong, but they still deserved to be heard. “I did not abuse him. I trained him to survive the war with Lord Voldemort —” the collective flinch Harry found so silly “—and I trained him to be his own person, devoted to his brother, ignoring the lies of the outside world. My training did not work, but I do not regret what I have done.”

Harry shifted around. He had wondered if his mother would repeat the regrets she’d expressed in her letters to him: that she would have trained him differently if she had known that he was the one who reflected Voldemort’s Killing Curse. But she seemed to have decided, even as he had, that it would do no good for the truth of the prophecy to get back to their enemy. She would speak as if the version of the prophecy she had believed for thirteen years was the true one, then. Something in Harry unclenched and relaxed.

“There is a Pensieve memory I wish to show,” said Madam Bones, and flicked her wand through the Pensieve on the stand before her. Harry watched as droplets arched over the railing, and then watched them in his window as they coalesced. He knew that the memory should probably still have been invisible to anyone but the Wizengamot and Lily, but he reached out with an effort of will, and broke the simple ward that kept him from seeing it.

It was a surprisingly ordinary memory to choose, really. Lily was testing him; he was about eight years old in the scene, Harry thought, and it was during the two months she had had him go without touching anyone, to get him used to the lonely life he would have to lead. She sat in a chair in the main room of the house at Godric’s Hollow, reading, and he sat next to her on a stool, with a book on defensive magic in his hands.

They were only a few inches parted. He could reach out and touch her if he wanted to.

That had been the test, Harry remembered. Lily had seen him avoid casual brushes of the hand from Sirius and Remus and Connor with satisfaction; she had seen the way he avoided coming to her for a good-night hug. Now she wanted to see what he would do with temptation right in front of him.

Harry could make out the fine tremors in his own body. It had been surprisingly hard, harder than he thought it should be with as secretive as he had already been, to simply ignore the impulse to touch someone. It would have made him feel better, though, as Lily had pointed out many times, that was an indulgence he couldn’t afford, just doing things to feel better. His life was given
Harry remembered this memory. He knew what came next. He winced—not because of what would happen, but because of how he knew the court was going to take it.

His younger self broke and reached out to touch his mother’s knee. Lily moved at once. She’d been waiting for that, Harry remembered, though her gaze had seemed to be on her book the whole time.

Younger-Harry lowered his eyes at once, the way he’d always done when he displeased his mother.

“Harry.” Lily’s voice was a whip. “Look at me.”

He looked up at her. Lily shook her head at him.

“You need to learn more control,” she said softly. “What will happen if you give in to that same carelessness around a Death Eater? You could be killed, Harry, with just a cut from a knife or a simple curse from a wand. It wouldn’t have to travel very far. And then what would Connor do?”

Younger-Harry swallowed, and then said, “But you’re not a Death Eater.” Older-Harry thought it a feeble argument, all these years later. Of course, he’d had those impulses he still didn’t understand, unable to think why someone else human under his hands would feel so good.

“No,” said Lily, “but neither will the other children in Gryffindor House be, and they could still trap you and distract you. What would happen if you were being hugged, and couldn’t make it to Connor’s side on time? What would happen if a friend snagged your hand when you are about to charge into battle, insisting that you couldn’t jump between him and a curse, and he died? What then, Harry?”

Younger-Harry shrank. Older-Harry closed his eyes. He could hear the Wizengamot making noises of outrage. Madam Bones knew what she was doing when she chose this memory, all right. Damnit. I wish they were using Draco’s enhanced Pensieve spell. Then they’d know why she was doing this. They’d be able to understand it much better.

“The world would fall,” Younger-Harry whispered.

“That’s right.” Older-Harry opened his eyes to see Memory-Lily nod at his hand. “No touching, Harry. I know this is a hard lesson, but it’s just one of many you’ll have to learn. And it doesn’t really hurt as much as a curse, does it?” She flashed him a smile, and Younger-Harry smiled back. It had been one of the rare evenings when Sirius, Remus, James, and Connor were all out playing on the lawn, and so Harry and Lily could speak freely of the secret they shared.

“That’s right,” he said.

“Good boy,” said Lily, and climbed back onto her chair. Younger-Harry directed his attention to the book, determined not to break faith again. And he hadn’t, Harry remembered, with a feeling like a band of fire circling his chest. Seven weeks more that test had lasted, and he hadn’t broken once.

The memory faded. Madam Bones began digging around in her papers. Harry started as someone brushed his arm, and so strong were the impressions the image had left on him that he flinched away before he thought, not wanting to be touched.

He turned to see Snape staring hard at him. Harry dropped his eyes. When Snape was concentrating hard enough, he could use Legilimency just from a gaze. Harry didn’t want his emotions read right now.

“I think we should leave,” said Snape.

“No,” Harry whispered back, proud to hear how stern his voice was, for all its low volume. “I want to know what happens.”

“You can get that from a report later,” Snape said, leaning nearer as Madam Bones briefly looked up to glare at the talkers in the audience. “I meant what I said, Harry. Your mental health is not to be damaged any further. You will come with me if I think you are hurting.”

“And I’m not hurting yet,” Harry flared, and then looked pointedly away from Snape as Madam Bones began to ask the first of her questions.
“Reports from Madam Shiverwood of the Department of Magical Family and Child Services indicate that all children need to be touched regularly, or their growth is damaged,” said Madam Bones, a stern rasp in her voice. “This is even more essential for wizard children than for Muggle children, as their magic needs to seek out the companionship of similar power, and learn to stay under a child’s skin so that accidental magic stops happening. Given that, Mrs. Potter, will you really say that teaching your son to avoid touch was not abuse?”

“Harry had learned how to handle his magic from a very young age,” said Lily calmly. Harry was glad that she could be calm. The most peculiar shaking had taken up residence in his shoulders. “It was a part of his training. He did not need the contact for the same reason that other wizard children do.”

Snape was making a growling sound beside Harry. Harry looked at his guardian’s face, and quickly away again. Seeing such blank, vicious hatred there made it easy to remember the Death Eater Snape had been.

“So you deny that it was abuse?” Madam Bones clarified.

“I do,” said Lily. “I did what I had to do to save the world. I made decisions that no one else but Albus Dumbledore has ever made. You have no right to put me on trial for this,” she added unexpectedly, rising as much to her feet as the chains would allow her and sweeping her gaze across the courtroom. Harry shivered as her eyes passed across him. “None of you would have done as much. All of you would have huddled in bed while Voldemort came for you, if my sons had not borne the burden.”

_Probably true_, Harry thought.

“Sit down, Mrs. Potter.” Madam Bones’s voice was flat. She waited until Lily had obeyed, then said, “Another memory.”

This time, the memory that was chosen made Harry sit back hard in his chair. _Merlin damn it, not this one! They’re all going to think they have the right to put her to death, after this one._

He was nine, practicing wandless magic. Lily stood in the background, patiently waiting for him to finish. When he turned around again, she beckoned. Harry watched his younger self’s image approach her and look up into her face. He envied, bitterly, the calmness of his own green eyes.

_There were times I was able to do that without Occlumency. When did they end?_

“Harry, we will continue your training in chocolate today,” said Lily. She unwrapped a Chocolate Frog. It immediately tried to leap out of her hand, but she held it still, slightly squashing one of its legs in the process; it had been a summer day, and the sweet was already starting to melt. “Indicate when you are ready to me.”

Younger-Harry closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Then he nodded and held out a hand.

Lily gave him the chocolate. Harry popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly. Then he murmured the spell that Lily had taught him for the sense of taste. “_Acerbitas in vicem mel._”

A moment later, he winced as bitterness flooded his tongue in place of the sweetness. The spell was only physical, however, and wouldn’t complete his training without an added psychological pattern to back it up. Younger-Harry knew that by then, and Older-Harry watched as he applied it. In Harry as he was now, of course, the training had made the reaction impulse, without the need for a spell.

“What are you thinking of, Harry?” whispered Lily.

“Connor in danger,” said Younger-Harry, and then whispered, “_Adligo memoriam._”

With no more than that, the idea of his brother in danger was bound to the bitterness, the memory working with the physical sense. More training would be needed, but in the end, it would insure that Harry never became lost in a physical sensation of sweetness, never entirely forgot his awareness of the world around him. Steel cords of perception would pull him up when he did.

Harry shuddered as the memory vanished, and he found himself pulled against Snape, his hair being stroked slowly. He tugged himself free at once, feeling the need to be away, on his own, free. The air away from his guardian seemed sweeter, and he breathed it gently, again avoiding Snape’s eyes.

“Do you deny that you trained your son to be afraid of good physical sensations?” Madam Bones asked then.

“I don’t deny that,” said Lily. “I don’t deny _any_ of the accusations that you are going to level at me today, Amelia—may I call you Amelia? What I deny is the reasoning behind them. I did not wantonly abuse my son for the sake of abusing him. I did what I
did for the good of the world. Were he not sculpted into Connor’s powerful guardian, Harry would have followed one of two courses: not playing his part in the prophecy, or becoming a Dark Lord.”

Harry had not actually known it would be so hard to hear her speaking those words. He curled into his chair, around his hand, watching as Lily glared with steady green eyes at Madam Bones, and raised a small barrier that stopped Snape’s attempt to embrace him.

“What in your son’s behavior convinced you that he could become a Dark Lord?” Madam Bones asked.

_Oh, no, don’t ask that, please don’t ask that... everyone’s going to know now..._

“The fact that his magic was so powerful,” Lily answered without hesitation. “That would be one part of it. If he could make things Vanish without even noticing it, then why shouldn’t he make someone Vanish when they annoyed him? And, too, there was the sensation of his magic. I could only compare it to dog vomit. There were times it stank like rotting flesh, however. That was the major purpose of the phoenix web, to save and cleanse his magic, and, by extension, save Harry. He was made unnatural by Voldemort’s attack. After it, his magic was stronger than it had been before. We had to restrain him, and we had to make him into someone who could serve and save the world, not just take from it.”

At least she stopped short of telling them that I’m Voldemort’s magical heir, Harry thought. He was panting, sweating, dizzy. Snape had struck a fist on the outside of the barrier, but Harry didn’t look at him. His eyes were on his mother, and she was the only important thing in the world.

“Mrs. Potter, do you know what you are saying about your own son?” Madam Bones sounded disbelieving.

_That’s right, said the crab-rage in Harry’s head, and pinched him with sharp pincers. She has no right to say those things about you. She said them once before, and they were wrong then. They are wrong now._

“I know it perfectly well,” said Lily fiercely. “I lived in the same house with him for eleven years. I knew what he was.”

Abruptly, her voice softened. “And I knew what he could become, what he might be with the phoenix web on his magic and the proper training. Someone wise and good, self-sacrificing, who could give up his life to save his brother and never think twice of it. Such selflessness is not innate to everyone. I knew there had to be good in Harry, or we could not have trained him the way we did.

“And I now know that he’ll save me if I ask, because I was the person who trained him in the ways of goodness, and he would never give up his mother, not really.” Her gaze turned in the direction of the balcony where he sat, and Harry knew she had seen him come in after all. “Harry? Will you stand and speak a word for your mother?”

“Don’t you dare,” said Snape, with a precision that he normally saved for describing mistakes in Potions.

Harry ignored him. His body no longer seemed entirely his to control. Images of the past were flashing near his eyes, and the conflicting impulses played round and round in his head. As he stood and went to the edge of the balcony railing, he imagined his mother proud, radiant, walking free of the courtroom without her chains. She would smile at him. She would call him a good boy. She had said that he could be good. She didn’t believe he was all evil.

Chasing the beautiful imaginings were the dark ones, the rage that said she didn’t deserve to live, that she had hurt him, that he had every right, according to the pureblood dances he had made him learn, to grasp and crush her life.

He did not know which impulse would overtake him when he looked over the balcony railing, but he knew he had to look.

He looked down, and met his mother’s eyes. He had no need for the window. Despite the distance between them, he knew he was meeting them, and he knew every detail of the clear green so well that it was as if she had levitated up in front of him.

“This is irregular,” said Madam Bones, sounding as if her outrage had half-choked her. “Mrs. Potter, sit down. Mr. Potter, sit down. I am leading the questioning, and—”

Lily ignored her, lifting one of her arms in a sweet, sweeping gesture that her manacles abruptly brought to a halt. “Harry,” she said softly. “My dear boy. You know I’ve loved you. You know I’ve taught you everything that’s made it possible for you to survive and prosper for so long. I’ve paid in return, given up my magic to your vengeance and my freedom to this world that doesn’t understand. Don’t you want to see me free? You could do it, you know. You’re strong enough. You could break my chains, and you could reach into the Ministry and free your father, and then we could go together to the house in Godric’s Hollow and have the idyll we should have had. This time, son, I promise you I’ll show you my love in ways you can recognize. I didn’t
know you were that desperate for a family, Harry, for a life somewhat more like what other people call normal, but this time I promise you’ll get it.”

The world spun faster and faster, becoming a maelstrom. Harry didn’t know which was stronger, the love or the hatred. He could imagine her chains shattering. He could imagine her throat crushed. He breathed, hard, and moment after moment passed without his making a decision. Madam Bones was calling for order, but her voice seemed faint and far away—and so did the sounds of another person forcing their way through the packed bodies towards him, at least until that person finally spoke.

“Harry.”

He turned his head. Draco was standing there, as close as the barrier Harry had raised would permit, even closer than Snape, his hands out and braced on the empty air holding him away from Harry. His eyes were gray, and somehow that color, even more present and clear than the green of his mother’s, grounded Harry, anchored him, made him listen as Draco spoke.

“I can feel your emotions,” Draco whispered. “My empathy isn’t that strong anymore, but it’s strong enough for this. That’s what you were afraid to tell me, wasn’t it? What you wouldn’t share in the Pensieve with me yesterday. My Harry. I’m so sorry. I might have guessed. You’ve always been afraid of every emotion in yourself but the ones she taught you to feel. But I can feel your hatred, like an icy wind blowing on my face, and I don’t fear it, Harry. And I feel your anger, like heat across my skin, and I rejoice in it. She’s not worth your destroying the courtroom or taking her life, not worth the guilt you would feel afterwards. You’re worth much more than that, much more than what she’s causing you to feel right now.” He took a step back, but only enough so that he could hold out one hand. His eyes never wavered. “Come to me, Harry.”

Harry felt the rage and the love and the hatred and the guilt yaw, and dip, and pitch, and turn. He wanted, still, to free his mother, and he wanted to slaughter her. Those two visions, warm smiling Lily and dead sprawled Lily, dueled for and claimed dominance of his sight.

Then he realized there was another impulse stronger than either of them, and that was the impulse to be just taken away somewhere, and held, so that he didn’t have to think about this.

He let out a loud sob, and dropped the barrier. Draco didn’t seem to move as he crossed the intervening space, looping his arms tightly around Harry’s waist and holding him close.

Harry lowered his head, trying desperately to hide the tears. He didn’t want to be a child, didn’t want to be so young, he had faced harder trials than this and come through intact, he didn’t want—

“It’s all right,” said Draco, and his voice still held no fear, only crooning triumph. “You can weep.”

And the rage won, sort of. It turned the memories Harry had seen today sideways, so that he had to look at them and hate them instead of vibrating in sympathy with Lily’s training. That made him decide to fight the sympathy, to touch people instead of hold them back, and he clasped his own arms around Draco’s waist in return, squeezing so tightly that Draco took in a little gasping breath, burying his head in Draco’s shoulder.

Madam Bones called for a halt in the trial. Harry felt himself half-carried, half-supported by Draco and Snape out of the courtroom. He kept his face bowed, and wondered where they were going.

But during that time, the tears forced their way past his eyelids and down his cheeks. When Draco lowered him gently into a bed in Merlin-knew-what part of the Ministry, his face was already hard and hurtful with crying. Harry tried to roll over, putting one arm up around his eyes, but Draco was there with him in an instant, forcing the arm away.

“No this time,” he said, and held Harry close, but open, so that he had to bury his face in cloth and flesh if he was going to bury it anywhere.

Harry hesitated, and then his emotions forced him past the hesitation, and he began to cry once more. Part of him despised himself for needing this, but the need was too great to be halted. Training and memories gave way to what Harry supposed he could call instincts. He didn’t think that Voldemort Apparating into the room could have pried him away from Draco in that instant.

He laid his head down and wept, in grief and rage and hatred and sheer relief that someone else knew what he was actually feeling.

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Snape waited until Harry’s tears had finally stopped, and he’d worn himself out with crying. He had several potions to induce either sleep or calm in his pockets, but when Draco gently laid Harry down on the bed in this small antechamber for the witnesses, and then curled up with him, Snape saw they weren’t necessary. Harry had simply fallen asleep from his weariness. His hand clutched Draco’s robes, and his handless arm curved around him with ferocious determination. To give Draco his due, he was holding back with scarcely less determination.

“Will you be all right?” he asked Draco. “I must to back to the courtroom and begin my testimony soon. I am the first of the witnesses for the prosecution.”

Draco arranged Harry so that his cheek lay on top of Harry’s hair, and then closed his own eyes. “We’ll be fine,” he said, the fierce, possessive joy in his voice as good as a Calming Draught to Snape’s ears after Harry’s helpless sobs. “He’s past the worst of it, I think. He’s not to come into contact with that bitch again.” That was said very casually, as if the insult were actually Lily Potter’s name.

“He will not,” said Snape softly, and wound up pulling out the potions after all and laying them on the table beside the bed. “Only use these if he needs them. The blue ones to relax him. The dark one is Dreamless Sleep, and the silver one will induce a lighter doze.”

“I know that,” said Draco, and rolled his eyes at him. “I am actually a good Potions student, sir.”

Snape scowled at him, to keep in practice, and then left the antechamber for the courtroom again. The last thing he saw of the two boys was Draco apparently attempting to arrange Harry so that no part of Harry’s body touched the bed.

Snape shut his concern up in an Occlumency pool. Harry was safely out of the courtroom, where he should have been in the first place, and beyond his mother’s manipulations. That meant Snape didn’t have to worry about him until such time as he came to and insisted on returning, or unless Lily managed to break free and find him.

Neither of those things will be happening.

With the concern shut up, his rage came back, a cold black boulder, and sat in him, and grew, until he was filled with frozen stone.

He had just reentered the courtroom when he heard a roar, and then several loud and frightened cries. He hastened to the balcony railing and peered over it, staring at the enormous lioness in the center of the floor. She was prowling towards the prisoner’s chair, her fangs bared. Lily Potter had shrunk back in the chair, having lost her defiant manner of a few minutes before, and shook.

Snape knew who it must be: one of the *puellaris* witches. Since Elfrida Bulstrode had not attended the trial, fearing, rightly, that she would transform when she saw Lily, this left Laura Gloryflower.

A few Aurors had hastened up, but their spells seemed to bounce from the lioness; Snape knew the *puellaris* witches had nearly the magic resistance of werewolves in this form. Of course, there was also the fact that the Aurors didn’t seem to be trying. Perhaps they wanted the woman to be hurt.

Snape took a deep breath, cast *Sonorus* on himself, and leaned over the balcony. “Gloryflower!” he cried.

The lioness’s tail twitched, twice. Then she turned and stalked towards the prisoner’s chair again, ignoring the more serious spells the Aurors fired at her.

Snape held his breath, but still hoped he might succeed. And he had, he saw. The lioness leaned near enough to Lily to take her head off and roared, a blast of breath that Snape could only surmise felt hot and meaty, from the expression on Lily’s face. Her jaws snapped once, a reminder, and then she turned and stalked away.
Lily fainted.

The Aurors shut their gaping mouths and hurried to remove the prisoner from the chair. The lioness waited, making it clear that she intended to escort them back to the cells. Wisely, no one made an issue of it, and Madam Bones resumed the moment the Aurors, the prisoner, and their unusual honor guard were gone.

James Potter came in next.

Snape felt his hatred spread and increase throughout his being with the force of hammer blows. He had hated this man for a very long time now, since the day he had tried to get Snape killed by a werewolf and rescued him only at the last moment, but that was nothing next to what he felt for what James had done to his son. He could have stopped Lily. He could have opened his eyes and seen what she was doing. Harry might have suffered years less of abuse than he had. But James had not done those things, and Harry was someone who still thought his emotions were evil and had to be fought with and contained alone, someone who flinched from being touched and couldn’t accept himself as human.

And James was not the cause of it, no, but he was one of the reasons it was not stopped.

“James Potter,” said Madam Bones, when he was seated. Snape stared steadily at him all the while, hating. James just looked as arrogant as he always did. “You are accused of the neglect of your son, Harry Potter—“

“That’s not true,” James quickly responded. Snape clenched his fists to keep himself from going for his wand. His wandless magic coiled around him and whispered interesting things. He kept that still and away from choking James’s life out with an effort.

“I assure you, it is true that you are charged with neglect.” Madam Bones sounded cranky. Snape couldn’t blame her. She had hardly been neutral in the first place, and then to have the constant interruptions in the trial proceedings would have tried the patience of a Demiguise. And then to see Lily importuning Harry…

Snape calmed himself before something unfortunate could happen, and reminded himself his turn at testimony would come, and that James Potter would not really look better as six different sets of Potions ingredients, ready-harvested.

“That’s not what I meant,” said James. “I mean that it’s not true I ever neglected Harry.”

The arm of Snape’s chair exploded. His magic circled him like a trailing serpent, the first time it had ever done so, and tried to slither under the balcony railing and into the main courtroom space. Snape restrained it with difficulty.

“We have memories and notes that say otherwise,” said Madam Bones, but she had allowed a note of curiosity to creep into her voice. “Why do you think you never did, Mr. Potter?”

“Because I didn’t know what was happening!” James threw his arms up in the air, but the chains tightened and stopped the gesture. “That’s the truth. I never knew Lily had trained Harry the way she did.”

“Ten years in the same house while the training happened, and you never knew?” Madam Bones questioned in disbelief. “Are you blind or stupid, Mr. Potter?”

Some of the audience members laughed at that, and Snape’s magic tightened around his ankles in wicked amusement. He suspected that Lily had sealed her fate with her little plea to Harry, and tipped the sympathy of the audience, if not the Wizengamot, firmly to his ward’s side. James would not find it easy to get out of this now, though Snape suspected he would avoid death.

“Neither,” said James in annoyance, flushing. “And the lead questioner isn’t supposed to insult the victims, Madam Bones. I read about that,” he added defiantly.

Madam Bones leaned forward, and her voice got quieter. “You are a defendant, not a victim of child abuse, you stupid, stupid man,” she said. “It was stupidity, and not blindness, then.” She pretended to write that down, while more of the courtroom snickered. Snape was glad that Harry was gone now. He undoubtedly would have been horrified, and convinced that James wasn’t getting a fair trial. He wasn’t, of course, but very few trials in the Wizengamot courtroom were fair—neither of Snape’s own had been—and this was far more fun. It was time that James paid in at least a little humiliation for the treatment he’d given Harry.
“I resent this,” said James, trying to hold himself in and use that cultured voice Snape remembered from school, the one that got people to follow along and do whatever Perfect Potter wanted them to do. “I resent it greatly. You are making me a laughingstock, Madam Bones.”

“No, you’re doing that quite neatly on your own,” said Madam Bones, inspiring another round of chuckles. “Now, Mr. Potter. You claim you noticed nothing during your son’s childhood, which we’ll define here as the time before he started Hogwarts. And afterwards? The notes we have state that you became aware of Harry’s abuse during his second year at school. That would have been while he was twelve. And yet, you did nothing?”

“Lily told me the truth, then,” said James. “That what she did was for the greater good of the world. She convinced me Harry was a sacrifice, and that visiting him or trying to change his situation would just increase our emotional ties to him, which wasn’t good, since he was destined to die in the War.”

Snape felt his amusement cool quickly and turn to disgust again. His magic whispered in his ear, mentioning that he could use chopped human liver for his Dragon-Calming Potion. Snape told it to go hang.

Madam Bones didn’t sound impressed, either. “And what happened when your wife was stripped of her magic? Our records indicate that you left the house at Godric’s Hollow then, and went to the Potter family home in Lux Aeterna. Why did you not divorce your wife and strive to protect your sons, when you had put distance between yourself and Mrs. Potter?”

“I—” James sighed. “This is complicated,” he said, with another expression Snape remembered from Hogwarts, one that spoke of his readiness to spin a wild tale to try and protect himself from the consequences of his own actions. “You see, I still loved Lily. I love her even now. I had to learn to love Harry. And she hadn’t been abusing Connor, not really. So I just needed a little time to get used to the idea.”

“You had more than a year,” said Madam Bones. “And still, you made no significant progress in protecting your son.”

“He didn’t need it then,” said James crossly, flushing. “He didn’t see her most of the time.”

“But Albus Dumbledore played a part in his life, and he continued his abuse of your son,” said Madam Bones. “And you still made no attempt to charge him or your wife with child abuse, or even go to a private Healer from St. Mungo’s and insure that the damage to Harry’s mind was undone. All in all, you seemed content to pretend that it had never happened, until the night you were arrested for neglect, when Minister Scrimgeour reports verbal abuse of your son, as in your blaming him for your arrest. Why, Mr. Potter?”

“All of this is more complicated than you can possibly understand!” James retorted.

“Then explain it to us, Mr. Potter.” Snape could hear the steady tap of Madam Bones’s fingernails as she struck her lectern. “We are gathered here to hear your side of the story. As there are no witnesses for the defense, you may have all the time you like.”

James visibly swallowed once or twice. Snape felt some of his anger melt and turn into satisfaction. Do you feel the rope coiling around your neck, Potter? Not that they’d literally hang you, but you can’t run anymore, can’t find an excuse they’ll believe. How does it feel, to know that the world that once supported you and that bitch of a wife of yours as good parents now stands on Harry’s side?

“I was upset,” James muttered at last. The acoustics of the chamber made sure he was heard. James looked as if he wished otherwise. “I did blame Harry. I shouldn’t have. That wasn’t verbal abuse, just a slip of the tongue.”

“Then explain the rest, Mr. Potter,” said Madam Bones at once. “Your not seeking help for Harry. Your not turning in his abusers. What of that?”

“They were my wife and my mentor, one of the greatest wizards who’s ever lived,” said James. “Would you have turned them in, Madam Bones?”

“Yes.”

Her resolute word seemed to shrink James, who looked about as if for help. Snape didn’t know if he’d actually seen him, or only surmised he must be in the courtroom, but James’s eyes narrowed abruptly, and he looked up at Madam Bones with new confidence.

“Severus Snape brought these charges,” he said. “The man hates me. He’s animated against me by a schoolboy rivalry that he
should have let drop a long time ago. Put him under Veritaserum. He’ll tell you that’s the truth.”

Madam Bones shook her head slowly, mockingly. “Not so, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Professor Snape filed the original charges, but we have received corroboration from a number of sources, too much evidence to dismiss. Now, I will ask you again. Why didn’t you turn in your son’s abusers?”

James shrank in on himself, and then a sullen expression settled on his face. He didn’t answer.

“Mr. Potter?”

Still no answer.

Madam Bones clucked her tongue sharply. “Does the defendant wish to say anything else?” When James remained quiet, she nodded to the Aurors to remove him, and then looked up at Snape. “First victim for the prosecution’s side of the case, please step forward.”

Snape walked towards the stairs that would take him to the courtroom proper, just barely remembering to take the *Sonorus* charm off his voice so he wouldn’t shout everywhere. His magic flowed with him, making him shiver. It did try to snap at James, but Snape kicked it back under control. He took the chair made for Harry, and at once it adjusted to his spine, molding itself comfortably around him. An improvement from the last time he’d been in this position, Snape had to admit as he looked up at Madam Bones.

“Professor Severus Snape,” Madam Bones began. “You are Harry Potter’s guardian?”

“I am,” said Snape. *Not that he always acknowledges it, but I am, and it would take more than a piece of paper in the Ministry to proclaim his guardian someone else.*

“And you filed the charges of abuse and neglect?”

“I did.” At the words “abuse and neglect,” his magic strained and danced like a Crup at the end of its leash, trying to get away and go in the direction the Aurors had taken James. Snape restrained it. He was going to get out of the Ministry without being convicted of murder, or anything else. It was important that he control his behavior in all aspects of his life, which was one reason he was grateful that Minerva had worked as hard as she had to make sure the potential murder charges against him for Rovenan’s death were dropped. He wanted to remain free, to insure that Harry believed him when he said that nothing mattered more than his health and safety.

“When did you first notice signs of abuse?”

“At the time, I did not know they were signs of abuse,” said Snape quietly, thinking back to Harry’s first year at Hogwarts. It struck him as odd now that he could have been so impatient with the boy then. Of course, he hadn’t known that Harry’s reluctance to do anything right, to live up to the skills that Snape could see burning brightly in him, was induced by his parents. It had seemed right and natural that someone in Slytherin House would follow his ambitions, and to think that Harry would put love for his untalented, *Gryffindor* brother, James Potter come again, above his own self-interest had driven Snape quiet mad. “He botched simple Potions he was capable of making. He remained behind his brother in all his classes. He hid the extent to which he could perform wandless magic and complicated spells. When he won the Quidditch match between *Gryffindor* and Slytherin in his first year, defeating two Death Eaters at the same time, he arranged matters to make it look as if his brother had won. When I saw into his mind in second year, as I trained him in Occlumency, I realized what the problem was.”

“And why did you not report it earlier?” Madam Bones sounded genuinely interested. Snape supposed she had been through the Pensieve Potion he’d turned in, and the memories collected from Lily and James during their rare cooperative periods with the Aurors, and had come to be convinced, had she doubted it at first, of the extent and malice behind Harry’s abuse.

“Because the Headmaster told me to keep silent on account of the prophecy, and at that time, I still believed in him,” said Snape. “I planned to treat Harry as a savior, train him to be a powerful wizard, and then reveal him as mightier than his brother at some point in the future. Then Harry himself begged me not to reveal the abuse. At the time, he seemed to have good reasons for it, and I listened to him. I did not know all the details of what his parents had done to him then.”

Madam Bones nodded. “And when did you first change your mind about staying silent?”

Snape could remember the moment with acid-etched clarity. It was one of the defining points in his life so far, after all.
“When Harry’s mind was shattered at the end of his second year,” he said softly. “You have heard him say his mind was webs, yes?” When Madam Bones nodded, he continued, “He had a magical snake who had become entwined in his webs. The snake was killed. Harry’s mind shattered. He had to rebuild himself piece by piece, and I entered his mind to help him do it. While there, I chose to do what I could to heal him, in defiance of the Headmaster.”

Madam Bones frowned and flipped through her pages for a moment. “There are references to multiple changes of Mr. Potter’s mind here,” she said. “How many times would you say he has almost gone mad?”

“Three,” said Snape without hesitation. “Once at the end of his second year, once in the middle of his third when his mother attempted to renew the phoenix web on him, and a few months ago when the Dark Lord returned and cut off his hand.” He noticed Madam Bones shuddering convulsively, and hoped, with anger like the bite of a northern breeze, that the shiver would pass along the line. You owe him so much, all of you, for defeating the Dark Lord five times so far, six if we may count the time on the beach. Well may you feel sorry for what has happened to him.

“Would you say that Mr. Potter’s abuse has exacerbated the effects of the damage to his mind?” Madam Bones asked.

“Yes. Indeed, in two cases it was the direct cause of it,” said Snape. “The boy needs to be safely away from his abusers, and they need to be punished for what they have done to him.” He remembered the emptiness in Harry’s eyes when he was pleading with Snape not to hurt them, that first evening when Lily and Dumbledore had been arrested, but then he dismissed the memory. I am sorry, Harry. They do. Dumbledore will never stop trying to gain control of you. Your mother would never stop pleading with you to save her, or the world. You have been their sacrifice, their penitent little sufferer, long enough. It’s time for you to start living, and for them, with all luck, to stop.

Madam Bones nodded in satisfaction. “What would you say is the worst abuse Mr. Potter has suffered, in detail?”

Snape began to describe the abuse, based mostly on details that he had taken from Dumbledore’s memories, forcing his mind to be elsewhere, as it was when he used to report the consequences of Death Eater meetings to the Headmaster. He was thinking, instead, of the way that Harry had put up a barrier to keep anyone from touching him when Lily spoke.

If the Wizengamot is so misguided as to free her, I will see her dead. I cannot kill her myself, or be suspected, because I will not go to Tullianum and I will not leave Harry. But I can and will make sure that someone else does it. A hint dropped in Mrs. Bulstrode’s ear might not be out of place.

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Harry stirred much sooner than Draco had expected him to, murmuring and rolling over about an hour after he had fallen asleep. Draco found himself disappointed. He had enjoyed the warmth, the trusting press of Harry’s body to his, and, most of all, the feeling that Harry had nothing to hide, neither emotions nor thoughts.

Harry, of course, opened his eyes, and immediately moved away from him, his cheeks flushing. “What time is it?” he asked, even as he used his wandless magic to cast a Tempus charm. He stiffened at the numbers it revealed, sucking in his breath. “Do you think my father’s testimony is over?” he asked, and started to turn towards the door.

Draco decided that letting Harry get away with this hiding was stupid, and therefore it wasn’t going to happen.

“Harry,” Draco said, and reached up, catching his chin and turning his face back.

Harry flushed again when they were face to face, and his eyes darted in another direction. Draco shook his head. Harry was definitely listening, look away though he might, and that was what mattered.

“You shouldn’t go back there,” Draco told him calmly. “Yes, your father’s testimony is over, and Snape and my mother and your other allies will be testifying now. It’ll do nothing but weigh on your mind. Stay here and talk to me. By the way your emotions burst out of you, you’re tired of cooping them up.” He shuddered a bit. The sudden assault of rage and hatred on his face where there had been nothing before had stunned him for long moments before he was able to get to Harry. Otherwise, he would have been at his side no more than a few seconds after Lily began her plea.

“I was just really tired,” said Harry, his words blurring. “Now we can—“

“This isn’t going to work, Harry,” said Draco, and heard his own voice tighten. Harry was not making him irritated so much as desperately worried and frustrated, but he did seem to be assuming that he could cry his eyes out, sleep in Draco’s arms for an hour, and then go on as if nothing had happened. That wasn’t the way it was going to be. Now that Draco had a better idea of
what Harry was hiding, he wasn’t going to let him go back to hiding it. “You’ve got a secret that’s hurting you the same way
denying yourself sleep did last year—”

“They’re not the same,” said Harry. “I know why I lost control then. This time, it’s just weakness.”

“Merlin, Harry,” said Draco softly, and pulled him down again, so that Harry was resting on his chest. “You’ve survived abuse,
and you’re at the trial of your abusers. The last thing I would say that is is weakness. Normal emotions, yes, and I’m sorry you’ve
struggled to hide them for so long. Why did you? Did you think we’d hate you for them?” He moved one hand strongly over
Harry’s back, his longing for Harry to speak more intense than even his longing to touch him at the moment.

“I don’t want to feel them,” said Harry, and then yanked at Draco’s arms, though, Draco noted, he still didn’t use his magic to
block touch, as he had earlier at the trial. “I want to spare my parents. I hate them, and I don’t want to hate them, and—oh, fuck.”
He broke off awkwardly, and Draco realized he was probably on the verge of tears again.

“But you do,” said Draco softly. “And probably, Harry, if you really want to stop feeling those things, the only way through is to
speak about them.”

“What is it with you and Snape and this mania for me talking?” Harry glared at him from beneath his fringe, but Draco knew at
least half the rage in those brilliant green eyes was directed against himself. The other half was aimed at Lily and James, or at
least Draco hoped so. “I don’t want to.”

“Why?” Draco whispered.

“I don’t want to tell you why, either. Besides, you know it.” Harry made another, more determined effort to get away.

Draco wished Harry would take a Calming Draught, but knew he had no chance of getting him to agree to that right now, and that
he’d lose Harry’s trust forever if he force-fed him one. He rolled over instead, pinning Harry’s lower body to the bed with his
own. That brought up unfortunate ideas, but Draco found it easy to push them away. Harry’s expression wasn’t panicked, just
miserable. He must know that being this close, or even just the sensation of arms around him and a hand stroking his back, was
causing him to surrender.

“Harry,” Draco said softly, “you can feel as much rage and hatred as you want. I won’t despise you for it. Neither will Snape.
Neither will anyone who knows the truth.” His yearning to hear what Harry wanted to tell him grew sharp as a knife-blade.

“I want everything you are,” he thought, but didn’t say, in case
those words might push Harry too far.

“I don’t want these emotions,” Harry said precisely. “If you convince me it’s all right to have them, I’ll just keep on feeling them.
And I don’t want to.”

“Why not?” Draco took a slight stab in the dark. In truth, he thought he was correct, but Harry was the most complicated person
he’d ever known. He could have some arcane subterranean reason for feeling the way he did. “Do you think they’re that
inconsistent with being vates?”

Harry jerked like a landed fish and tried to roll away again. Draco rolled with him, ending up in a messy half-embrace, half-
sprawled position.

“Just—don’t,” said Harry, and pushed at him. “I don’t want to do this, Draco. I don’t want to feel these things. I don’t want to
confess them.” He spoke so fast Draco could barely understand him, keeping his face turned away. “I don’t want to talk.”

“They’re normal, Harry,” Draco breathed. Harry was on the verge of a breakdown, he could feel it. He felt bad for pushing him,
but if he managed to thoroughly shatter Harry’s barriers, then at the very least, Harry wouldn’t go on pretending. “And you are
normal, in this respect at least.”

“I don’t want to be normal,” said Harry, and he sounded desperate. “It hurts.”
Draco clasped his arms more firmly around him. “What do you want to do?”

“Go back to the courtroom.”

Draco gave a little growl. “I meant, besides that.”

“And that’s what I want to do.” Harry rolled back over and looked at him. He had, with what superhuman effort Draco didn’t like to think, put his emotions away again. His face was calm and blank. “You can’t restrain me, Draco, you know that, not if I really want to go.”

And Draco did know that, though Harry might have been talking about the strength of his magic, and Draco simply meant in general. He wouldn’t oppose something Harry truly wanted—not least because he thought the courtroom would give another push to Harry’s barriers, and change him for good. He nodded and sat up, reaching for his wand to murmur a few quick cleaning charms on his hair, Harry’s hair—as much as that was possible—and the tear tracks on Harry’s face.

Harry waited impatiently for them to pass, then made for the door. Draco caught up with him and supported him with his arm.

Harry gave him a sharp glance. “I’m fine.”

“I like doing this,” Draco said, and then of course Harry gave him a startled glance, as if he couldn’t imagine that someone liked touching him for its own sake, but relented.

They walked back to the courtroom. Draco worked on burying his impatience. The more time he spent with Harry lately, the more he wanted. Not just time, of course, but everything. Touching him, hearing what he wanted to say, hearing what he didn’t want to say, wanting to be wanted back—

It was that last that was most frustrating, Draco acknowledged. Harry loved him, he knew that, but his emotions were tangled and wound around each other like barbed wire, and now he was hiding from them. Draco mostly wanted them out so Harry would heal, but he was selfish enough to admit that he also wanted them out so that Harry would stop bloody hiding from everything else, and get a move on.

After the trial, Draco was going to hold Harry to his promise about sharing his mindset via the Pensieve.

They arrived in the courtroom just as his mother was finishing her testimony. Draco avoided both his father’s and Snape’s glare—though he flinched more at his father’s than at Snape’s—and settled Harry back from the balcony railing in an empty seat. Harry just conjured a damn window in his palm, of course, so it obviously didn’t really matter where they sat.

“And the next witness for the prosecution,” said Madam Bones, in a carrying voice, “is Connor Potter.”

Only when Harry’s head jerked up, his eyes flying wide, did Draco realize that Harry hadn’t known his brother had worked out a deal with the Minister that would allow him to testify against his parents instead of taking a victim’s role. Connor had told him of it at several points during the last week, but Harry had never really seemed to hear, and now here was proof that he hadn’t.

_Here comes the next storm_, Draco thought, and prepared to hang on.

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**Chapter Forty-Three: Greater Love Hath No Brother**

Connor had known this wouldn’t be easy. Who would be so simple-minded as to think this would be _easy_?

But he hadn’t realized—because he hadn’t realized how little impact his announcements must have made on his brother—that Harry would be staring at him with betrayal in his eyes as he stood up to testify.

He hesitated. Then he shook his head and went forward, working his way out between the press of bodies. Most of the people sitting with him hadn’t realized who he was, and turned to stare at him in absorbed fascination as he made his way forward. Connor wrestled with the temptation to reach up and either brush his fringe over his scar or toss it aside.

A nice-looking witch in the same row he’d been sitting in gave him a smile and a nod that seemed to say _It’s fine just the way it is, dear_. Connor smiled back at her, and walked the rest of the way around the galleries towards the steps into the main courtroom.
By that point, Harry had overcome his shock enough to protest. He was standing up, his hand extended to Connor across the intervening distance. Connor didn’t turn his head aside from his brother, because no Gryffindor would do that. He just returned his gaze as calmly as he could, and kept walking.

“Connor, please,” Harry whispered. His words echoed in the vast quiet that, for some reason, had decided to fall. Connor found himself irritated at the audience. They could talk now, since he hadn’t reached the floor of the courtroom and Madam Bones hadn’t begun the official questioning yet. Why did they have to choose now to act like they’d all eaten Fred and George’s Silencing Sweets?

“Please don’t do this.”

He had known Harry would say that, or words like that. He’d imagined that he would be able to make some grand speech when the time came. Surely, even if no one else could get through to Harry and make him see the necessity of this, he should be able to. He was Harry’s twin brother, after all.

But he found his mouth so dry and his head so filled with what had to come next that no grand speeches helped him along. He just held Harry’s eyes and said, “This has to be done.”

Professor Snape, who sat closer to the staircase, was giving him what Connor thought was only the second approving look he’d ever got from him.

“Please take your place in the witness’s chair, Mr. Potter.” Connor couldn’t make out the exact tone of Madam Bones’s voice—she could have been irritated, amused, angry, or weary—but he decided that he’d made a spectacle of himself long enough. He sped up until he was on the floor, and then strode across to seat himself in the witness’s chair. It adjusted itself to his neck at once. Connor was glad of that, even as he fervently wiped his palms off on his trousers. This was going to be hard enough without feeling as though he were taking his OWLS already.

“You are Harry’s twin brother, Mr. Potter?” Madam Bones asked him.

I’m the same age as he is, and you’re addressing me by the same last name. I’d think that was pretty bloody obvious. But Connor had given himself lecture after lecture not to do anything that would mess up the trial for Harry, so he contented himself with a terse nod.

“And you grew up in Godric’s Hollow with him and with your parents?”

“Yes, Madam Bones,” said Connor, thinking that two nods in a row was a bit much, when everyone was craning forward along the railings to watch him. They might start thinking he was afraid to speak. Connor didn’t want to give them that impression, not at all. He wanted to give them the impression that his mother was a raving lunatic who needed to be prevented from hurting Harry anymore and his father was a spineless coward who shouldn’t be let out of a cell for as long as he lived, just in case he did something out of spineless cowardice to make either of their lives miserable again.

“How aware were you of the abuse during Harry’s childhood?”

Connor grimaced. This was the part that wouldn’t look so great. On the other hand, he’d been a child, and not the most observant of children, either. It had taken him how long to notice that Harry was the better flyer, for example? And he still hadn’t taken him seriously as Quidditch competition after that, and paid the price. So of course he hadn’t noticed Harry’s training.

“Not aware at all,” he made himself say. “Lily concealed it so well from me that I just thought Harry was bookish, and shy, and in awe of me, by nature.”

“Did you never notice his various wounds from the pain curses he practiced?” Madam Bones asked, curious now. “Or that he had wandless magic?”

Connor let out a breath and wiped his hands again. “No,” he had to admit. “He hid the spells, and made sure to perform the most advanced magic when he was away from me, or I was gone. I remember asking Lily a few times why Harry didn’t play outdoors with me more often. She just reassured me that he liked to read, and that anyway, I didn’t have to worry about it, because there would be plenty of children who wanted to play outside with the Boy-Who-Lived when I went to Hogwarts.” He heard more than a few people snicker in the audience. He hoped one of them wasn’t Professor Snape. Not that he liked the git, Merlin no, but he was Harry’s guardian, and he knew how to teach dueling spells even if he didn’t have a clue about Potions. Connor wanted to get along with him because of that. He had the feeling that Professor Snape was going to be in Harry’s life for a long time.
“So your mother trained you as well?” Madam Bones sounded soft, and sorry for him now.

Connor scowled. They were not going to make this about him. That was what Lily and James had done for too long. “Not the same way she trained Harry. Never the same. She only had me practice a few charms that I could handle, that every wizarding boy handles. I saw more magic from James and his friends—“

“Friends?”

“Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.” Connor was a little nervous about naming Remus. He didn’t want anyone in the courtroom to remember that his godfather was a werewolf. But Madam Bones had her mind on other things, as it turned out.

“Do you think they were aware of the extent of Harry’s training?”

Connor shook his head. They weren’t going to touch Sirius and Remus, either. He’d argued with the Minister by letter for a long time before he managed to convince him to let him testify, and he’d become aware that the Minister didn’t like werewolves much. So this wouldn’t become about Remus, and Sirius was dead, and he’d died a hero no matter what anyone said, so it wouldn’t be about him. “They never knew. Lily was very careful to keep it hidden.”

Madam Bones’s face was troubled. “It just seems extraordinary that four people in the same house could have gone ignorant of such extensive and untrammeled abuse,” she murmured.

Connor shrugged, even as he felt himself flush. “I told you, I didn’t see everything. And Sirius and Remus weren’t there all the time. And James…” He trailed off for a moment, looking up towards the balcony where Harry sat. He knew what he wanted to say, but he wasn’t sure that he wanted his brother to hear it.

“And your father?” Madam Bones prompted him gently.

Connor took a deep breath and got the bit between his teeth. He remembered what Hermione had told him when he confessed his fears of being part of the trial. Oh, there’d been lots of cryptic babble about psychological states that Connor didn’t even try to follow, but Hermione made her best points in plain English, and he remembered those. It’s got to be done, Connor. Harry will never be healthy if his wounds aren’t healed, and this is the best way of doing that.

And there was what Ron had said, too. Think of it like this, mate. At least you’re helping them find a legal solution. What the Wizengamot’s going to do to ’em won’t seem like anything beside what Snape will do. And the Malfoys? Ron had shuddered. Can you imagine them?

“James was an idiot,” he said bluntly. “And sometimes he acted weird around Harry. I know that he saw things, sometimes, but he pretended he didn’t see them. And a few times he told me to be careful around Harry, but he’d never tell me why. He was a coward. He was always a coward. I told him last year that I wouldn’t let him hurt Harry, and I meant that. And then he did it when he verbally abused him after he was arrested.” He turned and sought out his twin’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Harry,” he added. “I wanted to be there to punch his nose in after I heard about it.”

Madam Bones made a small noise that Connor thought was probably a muffled chuckle. He didn’t care. He’d needed to say that, and now that he’d said it, the questioning could continue.

It didn’t continue, not quite yet. Before Madam Bones could say anything, Connor saw Harry’s head appear over the side of the balcony railing. He waited. Harry was going to say something unfortunate.

That was all right. Connor had actually been more prepared for this than for the moment he went down the staircase to testify. It had taken him a lot of putting together of puzzle pieces—Hermione said he was a ‘bricoleur,’ which Connor thought meant a nicer way of saying ‘slow’—to realize that that mantra the Slytherins repeated to themselves was true and, yes, Harry was an idiot sometimes.

“Connor,” Harry said softly, “do you know all about Mum’s history with Dumbledore?”

And that’s unfortunate thing number one. I wish he would stop calling her Mum. “Yes, I do,” said Connor. “You did mention something about that.” And Harry had, in his conversations in the last week while he was walking about the school and muttering to himself. Connor had been part of the honor guard that trailed along on several occasions.

“Mr. Potter,” said Madam Bones, and then paused for an infinitely small second, as if trying to figure out whether they would
know which one she was addressing. Then she continued with greater force. “Sit down.”

“Then you know that she wasn’t really responsible for her own actions,” Harry said earnestly. “I meant to bring that up, but I couldn’t stay in my own questioning that long, and Mum doesn’t think she did what she did only because of Dumbledore, so she wouldn’t say it in her own defense. But you can. You know that a lot of her actions were influenced by him.”

“Yes,” said Connor. He waited a heartbeat, just in case Harry would go back and sit down, or Draco or Professor Snape would make him sit down. Neither happened. Connor sighed, and finished the statement. “So?”

“So she doesn’t deserve to be blamed for this.” Harry’s hand curled around the railing. “You can make them see that. You can say that. You can still speak, and I can’t.”

“You’re doing a good job of interrupting the trial right now.” Madam Bones’s voice was an odd mixture of soft tone and loud volume, as though she were trying to figure out how to get Harry to stop interrupting the trial without yelling at him and perhaps making what he’d suffered worse. “Please, Mr. Potter, sit down again.”

Connor ignored the questioner. Harry had probably always been going to bring this up. He probably wouldn’t understand Connor’s answer, either. That was all right. The partial idiocy accounted for it.

“Dumbledore didn’t take away her ability to choose,” said Connor. “He never did that. No webs on her. The Wizengamot tested her for that, Harry, both right after she came in and after they found out about his spell that was influencing people. The Minister told me. So she was free-willed. She still had a choice. He didn’t coerce her to do what she did.”

“But it was like a web,” Harry said. “And she didn’t mean to do it to me for the sake of abuse, Connor. She was saving the world. You heard her. She could have made me a sacrifice, and then—”

Connor could feel himself start to scowl midway through that little speech. One of the things he’d learned in the weeks leading up to the trial was how hard it was for him, now, to listen to Harry put himself down. Everyone else around Harry seemed to understand it better than he did. Or maybe they’d just been taking care not to upset Harry as the trial came near. Whatever it was, Connor thought it was about time Harry knew the truth.

“You were actually under a web, Harry, and you broke free!” he said, loudly enough that he saw some of the people in the audience wince and lean back from the railings. “Don’t you dare make excuses for her when you had a lot more odds stacked against you and climbed over all of them!”

“Misters Potter—” Madam Bones was saying, sounding upset, and then someone must have cast a Silencio on her. It was the only way Connor could have heard what Harry said next, his voice was so quiet.

“It’s all right, Connor,” Harry said. “Please. Please don’t condemn her to death. What do you want? I’ll give you anything you want.”

Connor closed his eyes as a wave of pity came over him. He did manage to say, “Please go back and sit down again, Harry.”

“And you won’t talk about her that way anymore?”

Connor knew that Harry’s eyes would be bright with hope if he looked. He knew that he would be relaxing, at the thought of the woman who’d abused him, whose womb they’d been unlucky enough to come out of, surviving, maybe even walking free.

“I didn’t say that I was making a bargain with you,” said Connor, quietly, and then forced himself to look up again. “I asked you to please go and sit down again. I’m going to talk about Lily, Harry, and try my best to make sure that she’s locked up in Tullianum.”

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t know that you hated them this much,” he said.

Connor had never been gladder that he wasn’t Harry. He could just hate his parents. He’d tried not to, for a while, but he’d kept picking up pieces and putting them together, and after a while, he couldn’t ignore the puzzle staring him in the face anymore. To forgive Lily and James was impossible, not when they’d just keep coming at Harry. And they’d said and said that they were right, they must be right, because they served the Light and they were Gryffindors. They’d said that over and over again during his childhood, even during the times when Connor asked what was wrong with Harry or why the other Hogwarts Houses let Slytherins stay in the school if they were evil or whether they were sure that he could defeat Voldemort.
And then it turned out that they couldn’t live up to the ideals that Light wizards and Gryffindors should live up to. They’d lied about what they were. They were cowards, and they wanted Harry to save them, and they wanted to hide. Connor had known then that he hated them, and that he wanted to try as hard as he could to make them go away permanently, and he’d argued with the Minister until he wore him down.

At this point, not even pity for his brother would stop Connor, because he knew Harry’s life would be so much better without them. He couldn’t comfort his brother like Professor Snape could, or share secrets with him like Draco, or even fight beside him yet the way his allies could. But he could do this.

“Well, I do hate them,” he said. Madam Bones tried to say something then, but apparently the unknown person renewed the Silencio the moment she started to speak. Connor was grateful for that. He wanted to talk, and he doubted that Madam Bones would have let him get away with saying this for long. Luckily, even the other members of the Wizengamot seemed too enchanted to interrupt. “They risked our lives when we were a year and a half old, Harry. They sent Peter to prison for their crimes, and told us he was evil all the time. They lied about Regulus. Lily trained you endlessly, and didn’t even let me have a choice about whether I wanted you to protect me or not. They gave us prejudices that made you hate what you were for your first two years at Hogwarts, and me hate you for the first three. James got better for a little while, but then when everything turned around, he blamed you instead of trying to do something about it. He acted like a prat when he was tried, too. And what was their justification for everything? A prophecy they couldn’t even interpret right!”

Until he said that, Connor didn’t realize he was going to say it. He heard the shocked gasps around him, and then some other member of the Wizengamot said, “Mr. Potter, is this true? Your brother told us that your parents and Headmaster Dumbledore based their actions on a prophecy they sincerely believed to be true. And now you are saying they did not know the truth of it?”

Connor made some quick calculations. He knew Harry had wanted to keep the true nature of the prophecy secret, but so had Lily, which wasn’t a recommendation for him. And it wasn’t as though Voldemort didn’t already know the truth; he’d gone after Harry first the last three years, not Connor. Connor would keep the exact wording and the changeable nature of the prophecy quiet, but he didn’t see any reason not to let Harry get the credit he always should have. Fair’s fair.

“My brother is the true Boy-Who-Lived,” he said quietly, and watched Harry’s face ripple and change as if it were a reflection in a pool of water broken by a stone. “He was the one who blocked Voldemort’s Killing Curse that Halloween night. He has a lightning bolt scar because of it. My parents left us exposed to Lord Voldemort on Dumbledore’s orders, so they didn’t know for certain whose scar came from rubble and whose scar came from Avada Kedavra. But I’ve seen—we’ve both seen—a Pensieve memory of that night, and heard the real story from Peter Pettigrew, who was there. It was Harry. And our parents just guessed, because they were afraid of Harry and they thought his magic was Dark, so they said that I was the Boy-Who-Lived and Harry was my guardian. They were trying to shape the prophecy to fit their own ends. They made Harry into what he is because they were afraid. They’re cowards. They abused my brother, and I don’t want them to go free.”

He ran out of breath, and sagged back against his chair. Connor glanced from Wizengamot member’s face to Wizengamot member’s face, and wondered what his testimony would mean. They were perfectly blank now, good political faces, and he didn’t have the expertise in reading expressions that Harry did.

Madam Bones had apparently finally managed to get herself free of the Silencio. She took a deep breath and said, “Mr. Potter, I’m sure you realize that this testimony is highly irregular.”

“I don’t care,” Connor muttered under his breath, cross. He’d said a lot of what he wanted to say already. He waited to see what questions she would ask him now.

“But I would like to clarify some points of it,” Madam Bones continued. “You are sure that your parents and Albus Dumbledore did not know which of you was the Boy-Who-Lived?”

“They made a guess,” said Connor angrily. “But it was in the face of the evidence. They had reasons to suspect Harry, since his magic was stronger and waving around him after the attack. I’m not powerful. They just didn’t want it to be him, so they manhandled fate and said I was the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“And what are the reasons they didn’t want it to be him?”

_Did the spell cover her ears, too?_ Connor folded his arms and glared up at her. “Fear,” he snapped. “Their stupid idea that Harry could turn into a Dark Lord. And more fear. They always thought he was Dark, you heard Lily say that. They thought he was foul.” He thought of a trick to use. It was a trick that Harry would never use, but then, Harry was too self-sacrificing. He let his voice waver and drop, and a sound of tears creep into it. “Can you imagine what it was like, to grow up in a house with parents who thought like that? And my brother can’t even see that it was wrong? Do you see what they’ve done to him?”
This time, he saw some of the expressions change to pity. He let out a deep breath. He didn’t know if he’d won, but he thought he’d come pretty close.

“Connor.”

And there went Harry, again. Luckily, this time someone did tug him away from the railing and make him sit down, and Madam Bones resumed the questioning. From there, it was mostly clarification on points he’d already raised, but Madam Bones did dip her wand into the Pensieve and summon forth a few more memories.

Connor could see them for the first time. He watched as Lily told Harry that he must not expect to have time away from Connor, because his life was bound up in his brother’s. He had to make sure Connor survived the War, first, and survived it innocent enough to kill Voldemort. Then his primary duty, if they both lived afterwards, was making Connor happy.

Connor shivered and scrunched up his arms. The thought of someone else living for him was really, really creepy.

I don’t want someone else to live for me. And if Lily had asked me, I would have told her that.

He watched as Lily cast a spell that made Harry feel as if he were cradled, held in warm, safe, loving arms, and then paired it with one that made the touch turn cold and slimy. Harry tied it to himself with what sounded like a memory charm to Connor. Several memories like that made it clear that he’d been trained to consider any kind of touch, little by little, as something to be squirmed away from.

Connor felt his anger rising as he watched that. You didn’t need to do that, even if you wanted him to protect me, he told Lily in his mind. You could just have taught him defensive magic and let him be. But no, you had to do this. You couldn’t really have thought that someone would be hugging him in the middle of a battle. You just wanted to twist him more, because you hated him.

It made it worse that he recognized the day of the first memory, because of the old practice wand lying on a table next to Harry. It was their ninth birthday, and they’d both received new practice wands, so Connor had excitedly abandoned his old one to go outside and cast charms with James and Sirius. He still remembered laughing proudly when he got a charm that made colored bubbles come out of the end of his wand to work right for the first time.

And Harry had been a few hundred feet away from him all the while, learning to hate being touched.

It made Connor want to punch Lily in the nose, too.

Then came a memory of them playing a Quidditch game, one where Harry came close to catching the Snitch. But Harry had kept it concealed from everyone that he was a better flyer than Connor, so Lily had thought he was trying deliberately to show his brother up. She’d apparently taken Harry off by himself afterward, while James ruffled Connor’s hair and congratulated him on the win—a win that Connor could see now, in the Pensieve, had been given to him, with Harry pulling up at the last moment.

Lily knelt down in front of Harry, her eyes bright as Connor remembered the Hungarian Horntail’s fire being in the Tournament last year. “Harry,” she said softly.

Harry stood with his head bowed and a look of profound misery on his face, though he didn’t have much of an expression normally. He looked up at his mother’s voice, though.

“Harry, Harry, Harry.” Lily shook her head back and forth, once for every time she spoke his name. Connor reminded himself that it really was just a Pensieve memory, so he couldn’t step in, grab his younger self’s broom, and concuss Lily with it. “What were you doing?”

“Playing with Connor,” Harry whispered, his voice so small and tight that Connor wondered at it. If he’d heard his brother sound like that any time during their years together as children, he would have known something was wrong. But then, a lot of the time Harry didn’t talk. He just smiled and listened.

And his eyes were always fixed on me.

Connor found that even more disturbing in retrospect, since at the time he’d never suspected anything there, either. He shivered, and then leaned forward as Lily spoke again.

“You weren’t just playing,” said Lily. “You almost won. And that would have broken your vow, Harry. Why did you almost
break your vow?” She sounded disappointed, not scolding, and Connor saw Harry wince and bow his head again. He didn’t cry, though. Connor tried to remember his brother crying before he came to Hogwarts and drew a blank.

“I didn’t know—I didn’t mean to—“

“But that was just it, Harry,” said Lily softly. “You always have to know. You always have to mean to. That’s why you aren’t like anyone else. It’s all right if some random Seeker in Gryffindor shows up Connor. But you can’t. You have to make sure that you always pay attention to what you’re doing. You might get your brother killed someday if you don’t pay attention. And you don’t want to do that, do you?” She paused for a long moment, then said, “Or maybe you do. I don’t know, Harry. Perhaps you’re jealous of Connor, and you want—”

“No, no, I promise,” Harry whispered, not sobbing, which just made it worse. “I promise. I’ve put it all away, Mum. I might get jealous, or angry, but I’ll put it away. I promise.” He looked up at her, and smiled slightly. “It won’t happen again.”

Lily kissed him on his forehead, which made Harry look positively rapturous. “That’s my sweet Harry.”

The image faded. Connor realized his hands were shaking, and wondered for one mad moment if Fred and George would like to help him figure out a way into Tullianum before the sentencing happened, so that they could make his mother pay with some of the twins’ crueler jokes. Madam Pomfrey still hadn’t managed to discover how to re-Transfigure Marietta, and Connor knew they had some tricks that made that look like a Canary Cream.

“Mr. Potter.”

Connor blinked, and looked up, and realized that Madam Bones was done with the questioning. “You don’t have anything else to ask me?” he asked, wishing she did. His hatred had built back up. He could say some more things. They would be mean and hurtful, and Harry probably didn’t want to hear them, but they would make him feel better.

Madam Bones made a small motion with her hand that could have been exhausted. “No. The next witness for the prosecution will be Peter Pettigrew.”

Connor nodded, and then went to climb back up the staircase. His legs felt heavy. He didn’t feel tired, though. He just felt, increasingly, that what he’d done wasn’t enough. Damn the Minister for not allowing post into Tullianum, anyway. I’m sure that Fred and George could get something through to Lily if that weren’t the case.

He reached the gallery level, and passed Peter on his way down. Peter gave him the first real smile he’d ever got from him, and squeezed his shoulder. Connor straightened his spine and lifted his head. You did good, that smile said.

He made for the doors. Madam Bones had given up on locking them, since most of the witnesses weren’t assumed to need the same delicate care that Sapientian had given Harry during his questioning, and it seemed the fate of this trial to be interrupted by people going in and out. Connor felt he was too angry to stay where he was.

“Connor. Connor, wait.”

He turned around, not at all surprised to see Harry coming up behind him, but a bit apprehensive. He was angry, but he didn’t want to vent that anger at his brother.

And Harry, judging from the look in his eye, was more than a bit vexed. At least Draco was with him, no more than a step from his right shoulder, and Snape was rising from his chair even as Peter began to speak his answers to Madam Bones’s questions. They would keep Harry from plastering him to the wall with wandless magic the way that he had in third year.

Well, I bloody well hope so, at least, Connor thought uneasily.

“How could you do that?” Harry asked in a hissing whisper the moment he was close enough. Connor noted, with a distant amusement, that Harry was now trying not to disrupt the normal proceedings of the courtroom. Sometimes, Harry, you have a very misguided set of priorities. Well, no, not sometimes. It’s only the idiocy that’s sometimes. “How could you betray our parents like that?”

Connor narrowed his eyes. For Harry to accuse Connor of betraying him was one thing; Connor had been prepared for that, and at least it would have showed that Harry was being a little selfish for once. But Harry wasn’t allowed to get away with just ignoring what Connor had said about hating their parents and feeling no loyalty towards them at all.
“I don’t care about them,” he said. “They’re not my parents any more.” It burned on the tip of his tongue to say that Harry shouldn’t consider them his parents any more, either, but he’d seen what happened earlier in the year when he just reacted without thinking: Harry thinking so little of himself that he took an unknown curse and wound up lying pale and motionless in a hospital bed. Maybe that wouldn’t happen here, but Connor wasn’t about to risk it. Harry and hospital beds had a way of coming together. “I care about you. You’re my brother. I want to protect you for once. So I did.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t need protecting. Connor—“

And then he stopped and stared, because Connor had let a snort of laughter escape. He couldn’t help himself. Draco had come up behind Harry and wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist, watching Connor over his shoulder, so that he could see the carefully concealed amusement in the gray eyes. It was immediately replaced by worry, though, so Connor thought that Draco probably knew how fragile Harry was.

“I don’t.” Harry twisted fretfully in Draco’s hug, reminding Connor far too much of the way he’d twisted when he was under that spell that was supposed to make him feel comfortable and good, learning to resist it. Draco didn’t let go, and Harry gave up on resistance in favor of leaning forward and glaring, his hand making a sharp gesture. “And why did you tell them I was the Boy-Who-Lived?”

“Because it’s true,” said Connor. “Because maybe now you’ll get even more protection, because people will think you’re Voldemort’s target, which is true. Because you deserve some credit for it, Harry.”

“I don’t—that’s not—I don’t want it.”

Connor sighed. “I’m sorry.” He had meant to say something about it, but not like that. “It’s out there now, though, and I don’t think anyone will forget it.”

“Please,” Harry whispered. “Please—“

“What is it, Harry?” Connor leaned nearer, never taking his eyes from Harry’s, thinking irreverently that Lily and Harry looked completely different despite having eyes the exact same color. “If I can do it, I will.”

“Will you go back, after the testimony today is over, and tell them you lied?” Harry whispered.

Connor sighed and stepped away. “I don’t want to think about you asking me that, Harry,” he said, and then moved off.

He heard Harry whisper behind him, “Please. I—I want you to. Please, Connor? Please? Anything you want, I promise—“ And then a sharp cry as his emotions probably escaped his control again. This time, Connor hoped that Draco and Snape would get him away from the courtroom and make it so that he couldn’t come back. A binding spell or a potion might not be out of place.

He just kept walking until he found a deserted patch of corridor to lean his face against, and sighed.

I didn’t like doing that.

He forcibly brought visions of the twins’ products to mind. There had to be some way of getting some of those past Tullianum security.

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Indigena Yaxley tucked her wand back inside her sleeve. She’d cast the spell to silence Madam Bones nonverbally, and with her real wand. The Ministry officials would search in bafflement, unable to find out who had done this, since, of course, no unregistered wands could get inside the building.

Indigena had wanted to hear the younger Potter’s words in full. And what fascinating words they had been, she mused. Of course, her new Lord knew about the prophecy already, but she would report this to him anyway. It was interesting.

And she did fear that interest would be lacking in her life now, since the Dark Lord insisted on tugging her away from her greenhouses and her gardens and making her torture people. Indigena found torture boring. At least he was letting her use Evan Rosier as thorn food.

She settled back and prepared to wait out the rest of the trial, though she didn’t think anything so interesting would come again. She had a mission, and one she was honor-bound to complete.
She had to smile again, thinking of the way Connor Potter had been reassured on catching sight of her as he fiddled with his fringe. Such a sweet boy, really, the kind to make a mother proud if he wasn’t testifying against her. She hoped she wouldn’t have to be the one to kill him.

Well, if I am, I’ll give him to the devouring grass. Just a few moments of intense pain, and then he’s done for. At least he’ll get a quick death.

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Chapter Forty-Four: The Wind of the Future

Harry felt it as he realized that his begging wasn’t going to convince Connor, that their parents might die, and Connor wouldn’t agree to the last desperate plan that Harry had thought of to save them.

For just a moment, temptation reared up in him, and turned, and looked him in the eye.

*You could use your magic to interfere, after all,* it whispered. *An Obliviate, or even just a simple confusion spell that would cause them to believe what you told them about the evidence—*

Harry shoved the temptation away from him, horrified that he’d listened to it for this long. Dimly, he heard himself crying out. He buried his face in his arm, unable to speak, barely able to think. It was easier just to feel the skin burning against his forehead, and the arms clutching at him, and to pant.

“Harry?” Draco whispered to him. “Harry, what was that?”

He shook his head, not thinking he could answer, either. Thought came back to him in drifting bits and pieces, like the broken flotsam of a shipwreck on the tide. He shuddered, and felt Draco tighten his hold again in concern. Obviously, the shudder hadn’t done a great job of convincing him that nothing was wrong.

Harry didn’t think he could stay here another moment. He hadn’t listened to Peter’s testimony so far, but he could hear it continuing behind him, relentless and calm, paving the road to execution. He *would* listen to it if he stayed here, and perhaps his desperation would grow until he reconsidered using magic to interfere with the process of the trial, as he’d said he wouldn’t, as no one but a Dark Lord would do.

“I need to get out of here,” he said, moving his mouth enough back from his arm that Draco could understand him. “Can you get me out of here, Draco?”

Draco was more than willing to comply. Harry kept his eyes lowered as they passed to the courtroom’s upper doors. He knew that most of the gazes would be pitying, but at least some would be speculative. They would begin thinking of him as the Boy-Who-Lived, now, and wouldn’t things change the moment some reporter wrote *that* up for the *Evening Prophet?*

Things had changed, and Harry felt, for the first time since the trial began, that he had a glimpse of just how great the changes would be. And as the protective dread for his parents faded and his rage reared up again, he knew that the changes wouldn’t be just in the outside world.

*Merlin.*

Draco and Snape had been right. Harry didn’t like admitting that even in his head, since what they’d wanted had seemed so mad, but it was true. Draco, ushering him into an anteroom that might or might not be the one they’d used before, and Snape, briskly unstoppering a vial, by the sounds of it, had both been right.

He needed to talk. He needed to think. He needed to shove this out, or he might end up taking the first step on the road that Dumbledore had followed. Dumbledore had had no qualms about using his magic to interfere with the process of the trial, after all, just as Voldemort didn’t care about destroying and manipulating other wizards’ lives to suit his own whims.

“Harry? Harry, will you drink this?”

Harry lifted his head, blinking. He wasn’t entirely sure if he’d had his eyes shut, but it felt that way, so involved in his own thoughts had he been. He certainly hadn’t realized that Snape had poured a Calming Draught into a conjured goblet and was holding it out to him, or that Draco hovered off to the side, eyes frenzied, somewhere between grabbing Snape’s hand and forcing
it away and opening Harry’s mouth and forcing the potion down his throat.

But they were still leaving it open to him. His choice.

*Yes. Everything has to be.*

Harry once more slammed his emotions into a box, as he had just before he went back to the courtroom with Draco. That box hadn’t held. This one had to. He padlocked it tightly. He would have to think about and resolve the questions he’d thrown into it, but for the moment, he just wasn’t in a place where he could accomplish that.

The word “place” hit his mind like an arrow, pinning him to one particular idea before he could stray from it.

*I need a place. I require it. I’ll use the Room of Requirement when we get back to Hogwarts.*

He took a deep breath, feeling much better now that he’d already made one decision, and said, “Yes. Thank you.” He reached out and accepted the goblet from Snape, who had just started to pull his hand back. Both Draco and Snape stared at him in shock as he drank the potion, wrinkling his nose slightly at the taste. It was sweet enough, but had a faint, acidic aftermath.

He felt the serenity spread across his mind like another Occlumency pool, and took a great, whooping breath. What emotions he still had he felt detached from, as if he were hovering above them—except for the determination. Absentmindedly, Harry wondered if Calming Draughts didn’t affect the will. It wasn’t something he’d ever researched, being more interested in the properties of the Potions themselves. *I can do this. I can still do this. And I’m going to do this.*

“I didn’t expect you to take it, Harry,” Draco said, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

“I know.” Harry looked up. “I felt I had to. I don’t want my magic exploding and destroying the Wizengamot.” Snape’s face hardened at that, but Harry refused to allow himself to think it was anger at him, because he knew it wouldn’t be. He was shaping his own thoughts into an arrow now, aiming at his target, forcing himself to ignore distracting, irrelevant, nagging little insecurities. It wasn’t very comfortable, but he wouldn’t have to endure for it very long.

*I can’t go on as I have been. I need to go to the Room of Requirement and think, not just feel and react. And I don’t want to do it alone, not this time. I’ll take Draco with me.*

“Can we go back to Hogwarts?” he asked. “I know that it wouldn’t be good for me to hear the rest of the testimony.” At the very least, he thought Hawthorn would testify—unless someone had found out she was a werewolf; the newest anti-werewolf restrictions said that known lycanthropes couldn’t testify in court—and Lucius. Remus couldn’t, of course, because too many people knew about his lycanthropy, including the Minister. Maybe Adalrico Bulstrode, if he was there; Harry hadn’t seen him.

And he had to stop reciting the list of witnesses to himself, or he would go mad. He brought himself down with a sharp chop, and thought nothing more about it. Those thoughts went into another box.

“And you want to hear it, Harry?” Draco asked.

“Very much,” Harry said softly. “Too much. I won’t, not now.” He hesitated one moment further, but if he didn’t tell them, it was likely neither of them would understand why he wanted to go to the Room of Requirement. Besides, he *wanted* to tell them. He could admit that much, in the privacy of his own head. “I almost used magic on Connor when he refused me.”

Draco closed his eyes. Snape drew in his breath sharply, and then said, “What kind of magic?”

“A spell I would have regretted using.” Harry met his eyes and held them, grabbing other thoughts that wanted to rise, about other circumstances when Snape had looked that way—last Christmas, most prominently—and throwing them recklessly into another box. The sense of urgency, similar to what he had felt when he was getting ready to rush to the battle on the beach, built up in him. “I can’t stay here. I have to get back to Hogwarts, and to the Room of Requirement. It’ll give me a place where I can actually face these damn things.”

Draco looked as if the morning had come. “Harry—“

He broke off, but Harry didn’t know if he was choked up, or didn’t trust himself to find the words, or if it was because of something else. Throwing more thoughts into boxes, he said, “Yes. I know. My parents may both die tomorrow, but I’ll have to go on living. And I’ve got to do something to make sure I can.” He’d lost track of how many boxes there were now, how many memories and feelings they were holding away from him so that he could function. That was all right. He had time to unpack
them, once he was in a place where he wouldn’t destroy anyone else when he did. “I must, I have to do this.”

Snape said nothing, but reached into a pocket of his robes and brought out a small key carved of what looked like ash wood. Harry blinked and looked up at him. “Sir?”

“The Headmistress thought we might have to return to Hogwarts quickly,” said Snape. “She has set up a Portkey location on the sixth floor that we may travel to for as long as the trial lasts.” He hesitated a long moment, then said, “Harry. Will you want to do this in the company of both of us, or only Draco?”

Looking into his guardian’s eyes, Harry wished he could say “both of you,” but he couldn’t. A large part of the anger he’d put into the boxes was still anger at Snape, at the way this had worked out. “With Draco, sir,” he murmured, and Snape nodded and put the ash key into his hand.

“Speak the Portkey incantation while you hold it, and both of you will be taken to Hogwarts,” he said, moving his gaze to include Draco. “I will stay here and watch the trial. I will tell you what they said later this evening, if you feel capable of hearing it, Harry.”

Harry was wildly grateful that he didn’t say something like, “If you’ve survived this bloody scheme with your mind intact.” Snape was showing trust now, too, showing that he expected Harry to do the right thing, and that there was no question of his survival because he wouldn’t endanger himself. He grasped the Portkey, and Draco stepped forward and held the other end.

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said. “For everything. Portus!”

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Draco recovered from the dizzying swirl of the Portkey method of travel faster than he usually did. Perhaps it was the odd emotion gripping him now, a mixture of battle-readiness and desperate joy. Perhaps it was that he’d been staring so intently at Harry’s face that he’d had a focus in the usual formless dance of color.

Perhaps it was just the fact that Harry had finally, finally decided that he was going to speak about this. And unlike the time he’d run away to Godric’s Hollow, he wasn’t going to do this alone.

Harry waited for a moment, until he was sure Draco had his feet, and then opened the door of the small closet they’d landed in. Draco peered out behind him, searching for moving students. They must have arrived in the middle of classes, though. Draco would have murmured a quick Tempus charm just to make sure, but Harry was already striding out of the closet and down the corridor, making for the stairs that would take them to the seventh floor and the Room of Requirement.

Draco sped up until he was almost running. He was taller than Harry, and his legs longer, but none of that seemed to matter when Harry got into one of these moods of his. Draco had seen moods like this when Harry faced the dragons in the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament, and when he was getting ready for the battle on the beach, and when they were leaving to fly to Woodhouse. It was Harry’s look when he was about to go conquer something.

But, Draco realized as they waited for one of the moving staircases to swing back around, it wasn’t exactly like any of those. The determination to face the dragons last year and Voldemort on the autumn equinox had had Harry’s usual protective fervor behind it; he knew that other people were in danger, and he wanted to do something to help them as soon as possible. At Woodhouse, he’d been almost giddy. This wasn’t giddy. It was—

Damn it. Malfoys are not supposed to lose all their words at once.

Harry’s magic was glimmering around him now, though Draco doubted that he knew it. When the staircase deposited them on the seventh floor, Harry almost floated off the last step rather than simply walking. The light that traced him shone indigo, and then red, and then green, pacing through the shades as Harry paced until he found the tapestry of the ballet-dancing trolls. As he began to move up and down before the opposite wall, muttering something fiercely under his breath, Draco realized that the magic had outlined Harry in a mantle of keen, dark color, like a trailing cloak.

He stepped closer, fascinated and awed and longing to hear what Harry muttered.

“I need a place where I can think for myself and talk to Draco and work out what I need to do and won’t harm anyone.”

Draco blinked. He would have thought the demand shorter, since Harry’s will ran so high. But he supposed Harry was trying to think consciously and painstakingly about this, so as not to miss out on anything he needed to do tonight.
If he does it. Harry had ignored so many invitations to talk about his emotions towards his parents in the last few weeks that Draco couldn’t help but think this would be another failed attempt.

And then he remembered that Harry had taken the Calming Draught of his own free will, and walked away from the courtroom, and invited Draco to come with him, and his hope began to rise.

He waited with suspended breath until a rough stone door appeared in the wall Harry’d been pacing in front of. Then Harry stepped forward and opened it, and Draco followed him inside, into a large dark space.

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Harry glanced around with eyes he could feel widening. He’d concentrated on his need rather than on what the room might look like when it formed itself, but still. He was sure he hadn’t been thinking of something like this.

The room was a gaping cavern now, large enough that Harry knew it would extend out of Hogwarts entirely if its dimensions were normal. The walls were made of a dense dark crystal, slick and gleaming, but smooth enough to present wavering reflections of himself and Draco. Harry’s wonder increased as he watched strings of silver move under the crystal, the worms that fed on it and spun it. He knew this substance, now. Called ianthinum, it was less rock than living thing, a growing matrix that slowly increased as its worms did. And it absorbed whatever magic was thrown at it. It had supposedly existed around Merlin’s time, but because no wizard had seen ianthinum since, Harry had had no clue if it was real or just an old legend.

Well, the Room can make it real, obviously.

Towards the far end, the ianthinum melted into darkness. Void or black fire? Harry couldn’t tell from looking at it, but from the way it moved, it might be either. He tossed a bit of magic into it, to see what would happen. It just fell, like a Knut down a bottomless pit, and didn’t come back. Harry smiled. Well, I can’t hurt anyone with my magic this way, even if I get angry enough to blow up half of Hogwarts.

The crystal didn’t cover the whole surface of the walls, he saw, when he turned and looked at them again, though the faint light—which came only from the worms in the ianthinum shedding their silver glow—had fooled him into thinking it did. He moved a step forward, and studied the small, framed portrait that hung, looking like a wizarding photograph, between one strip of deep blue and another.

He choked a bit when he recognized it. It was the memory that the Wizengamot had watched during Connor’s testimony, as Lily taught him how to resist taking pleasure from anyone else’s touch.

Harry flicked his eyes to the side, and saw other portraits waiting. He nodded. The Room had obviously decided that one thing he required was the inability to back away from any of his sacrifices.

He felt coiling terror rise from his belly in a spiral, heading for his heart, but he crushed it. He’d faced Lily’s training once before, hadn’t he, the day he asked for Draco to touch him? And he’d been equally courageous other times before.

Until he had that thought, he hadn’t realized how deeply and thoroughly Connor’s words about cowardice had shamed him.

Thank you, brother. You’re one of the reasons I’m here. But this time, I’m not screaming in pain as Sylarana’s death destroys me, and I’m not trying to rebuild my mind. This is making decisions that I should have made a long time ago, continuing the shift that’s already begun. I’m not Voldemort, and I’m not Dumbledore. I can accept that I have limitations, and I need to change, and that there are things in the world greater than I am. I can’t afford to do anything else. The strength of my magic and the fact that I want to be vates say that.

It was why he’d asked for a place to think, rather than feel. He’d had enough of reacting out of blind emotion. He was going to face the emotions, yes, but he was going to face them consciously. He’d felt ashamed of crying in Draco’s arms as he had earlier that day, and that just made him tighten up and pull away again. So this time he was going to do it his way.

“Harry? What do you think this is?”

Harry turned around, and saw Draco standing next to an enormous pendulum in the center of the room. Harry blinked and strode over to it, wondering how he could have missed it before. It was silver, and apparently hanging from the ceiling, and had a huge, sickle-shaped blade. Draco held a hand a few inches from it, as if he wanted to touch it but thought that wasn’t a good idea.
Harry shook his head. “I don’t know, Draco.”

Draco eyed it one more time, then took a step backward. “All right.” He faced Harry. “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

The pendulum began to swing. Harry moved Draco out of its path, made sure the blade wasn’t about to cut into his own back, and then met his boyfriend’s eyes.

“The things I can’t hide from anymore,” said Harry. “The reasons I didn’t want to use the Pensieve spell that you made, essentially.”

Draco’s mouth opened slightly, perhaps at the way Harry had phrased that. Then he asked, “Do you want me to summon a Pensieve? The Room could give it to us, if we require it, and I know how to cast the spell again.”

Harry shook his head. “I will keep my promise about that spell after the trial’s over, but I know my own mindset. I’ve just hidden from it.” He started walking back and forth, parallel to the pendulum’s swing. *Whoosh-thrum,* the enormous blade sang as it sailed past him. “I want you to help me talk it out, and tell me when I’m being stupid.”

Draco looked as though someone had slapped him. Harry cocked his head at him. “Did you not want to?” he asked. “I admit, I didn’t ask that before, but I thought you would have objected if you didn’t want to come.”

Draco said something inaudible, then shook his head and murmured, “Not—not at all, Harry. I’m just amazed that you’re actually willing to do it now. Did nearly using your magic have *that* much of an effect on you?”

“Yes,” said Harry flatly. He could already feel the emotions knocking on the insides of the boxes, demanding to be let out. He was no longer good at building and holding these kinds of solid containers, not since Snape had trained him so well in the fluid pools of Occlumency. “I saw that I could turn into what I hate. And I *don’t* want. I *will not*.”

“All right,” Draco breathed.

Harry took a deep breath, dissolved the first box, said, “You might want to stand out of the way,” and then turned and threw a burst of anger and magic at the ianthinum wall.

The magic manifested as a whirling black vortex, tugging in air and light as it moved about the room; Harry even saw the pendulum sway towards it, as if it wanted to vanish into it. And then the vortex touched the crystal, and turned into a waterfall of purple and blue. The *ianthinum* expanded a bit, and then settled back, pulsing gently.

Harry smiled. *At least I know that it works to absorb magic.* He squeezed his hand, and his magic sprang up and trailed him in faithful, obedient waves as he began talking again.

“I want so badly for them not to die, Draco. I told myself I was content with that. If I couldn’t save them from Tullianum—well, at least they’d be alive. I wanted the same thing for them as I did for anyone else. As long as they’re still alive, then I could visit them sometimes, perhaps—“

“No, you couldn’t have,” said Draco. “I would have sat on you if you tried.”

Harry nodded at him. “Yet another sign that I wasn’t thinking right, right there. And then I realized that I didn’t want the same thing for them as for anyone else. I wanted more. And I didn’t care that they’d abused me, that was what I told myself, I was somehow above all that—“

He dropped to his knees as two of the boxes shattered at once, and rage flooded him like a dark, hot whirlwind. Harry felt everything around him *burning.* He turned his head, to make sure Draco was all right, and found Draco standing safely on the other side of the pendulum, beyond which none of the flames could apparently pass.

A cool wind came blowing out of the darkness at the far end of the Room. Harry felt it take his flames and swallow them. In a moment, they were gone, but that didn’t remove the emotions, which circled in him like sharks hungry for blood.

Harry closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth, and drove his palm into the floor as he spoke the words he had to speak. “I do care. Quite obviously. There is part of me that hates them and wants them to die. Also quite obviously. And I need to stop thinking that I’m somehow above that, because if I was, I wouldn’t be feeling this.”

“And there’s no need for you to be a saint,” Draco snapped at him. “Quite obviously. For fuck’s sake, Harry, did you think that
you couldn’t be angry?”

“Yes,” said Harry, and then convulsed as another box broke. This let out a bunch of shame that tumbled merrily around in his chest, and he knew that he’d have to deal with that next. “That was exactly what I thought,” he whispered, and took a deep breath, and then he was crying.

Draco slid around the pendulum and came up to put his arms around him. Harry leaned his head on him, and did his best to talk through the sobs. The words didn’t sound that great individually, but, assembled, worked out as:

“I needed this, you know. I wanted to talk to someone so much about my parents before the trial, especially after I’d punished Mrs. Bulstrode and didn’t have that weighing on my mind anymore. I didn’t think there was anyone I could talk to. I was so convinced that you would hate me if you found out about my anger, my hatred, my desire to string them up by their guts until they were dead.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Draco whispered in his ear. “It’s not the kind of thing you’d go to McGonagall about, sure, but I don’t care, Harry, I don’t mind.” His hand was making large circles on Harry’s back now. “I would have helped you string your parents up by the guts.”

Harry found he could still smile, which was at least more than he’d been able to do during his crying jag earlier. “I know. But I still love them, too.”

A startled pause, and then Draco pulled away and glared at him. “And now I know that you’re a bloody idiot.”

Harry gloried in the sharp spark of defiance looking at him. He wanted Draco not to agree with him. He needed to be reminded that there were people in the world who didn’t think like him, who weren’t him, who believed things that were in perfect opposition to his own beliefs and with perfect justification. When he knew that, he had a reason to go on arguing, and he had the necessary caution to keep his magic from making too much of an impact on the world. He couldn’t just do whatever he liked, because there were other people here, too.

Neither Voldemort nor Dumbledore ever really remembered that.

“I am not,” he answered. “I love them, Draco. I wish they could have been real parents to me. I told Regulus that when he asked me on Saturday, the day we went to Cobley-by-the-Sea. The only family I’ve ever wanted to belong to is my own.”

Draco flinched as if the vortex had struck him. Then he stood up and moved several steps back. “Harry,” he whispered. “Does—I mean, my father hooked you into the wards on Malfoy Manor. Mother and Father gave you an alliance bracelet for your birthday. Does that mean nothing to you? Would you really prefer your mother and father over mine?”

Harry wanted to bite his own tongue, he wanted to take it all back, he wanted to say that of course he hadn’t meant it that way and of course he would issue an apology at once—

But this was fear, the kind of fear Connor had talked about, the kind that had made his parents send Peter to Azkaban for crimes he hadn’t committed. He had to remember that other people existed, but he couldn’t let fear of what they might say prevent him from facing his emotions.

And he had to remember, he had to, that Draco trusted him, loved him, was in love with him. That love was strong enough to survive a disagreement, even a savage one. Harry was walking in strange territory, grasping things he didn’t instinctively feel or know, had heard only as proverbs, for guidelines. But if he was ever going to make them part of his own life, then he had to do this.

“I would have preferred my mother and father the way I thought they were for the first eleven years of my life,” he said quietly. “My father was the perfect Gryffindor, brave and strong and so like Connor. And my mother was someone I shared a secret trust with. We were going to save the world together. If they were real? Yes, I’d prefer them. Your parents are wonderful, Draco, and they’ve done so much for me, but I don’t belong with them the way you do.”

Draco folded his arms and snarled at him, angry tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Harry tried to remember the last time he had seen him this enraged, and didn’t think it had been ever.

Fear ate at him. He Vanished it. Fear was the only emotion he was going to refuse to feel this afternoon, because it was fear that had kept him from feeling everything else.
“I’d like to know what other definition of belonging you’d use,” said Draco, voice cracking down the middle. “They’ve welcomed you, treated you like a son, and like a son-in-law, known before you did that I loved you—”

“And all of that’s wonderful,” said Harry. “But, for example, I don’t feel comfortable accepting the Black legacy because I think it should be yours. Or Andromeda’s, maybe.” He felt a surge of confusion. He let it ripple through him. He was granting permission to himself to do things like that, after all. “That kind of belonging, the kind that comes with blood. I don’t feel that with your family. I’m sorry. Maybe I will someday, but I don’t right now.”

Draco turned away from him. Harry let him. He was still listening—Draco had never been good at the silent treatment—and Harry knew that he was hardly defeated. This was still words. It was still a contest where they could be equal.

“But now I know that my parents weren’t the kind of people I thought they were,” he whispered. Images of his mother flashed and rippled before his eyes. Whoosh-thrum, the pendulum sang. “I wanted them to be, and I desired them to be. I thought I could still make my mother into that kind of person when she appealed to me. She really did believe that she was saving the world. So, if that much of her was real, why wouldn’t the rest of it be?”

“Because she abused you!” Draco screamed, swinging around again. “Does that fact not stay in your mind for longer than two minutes at a time, Harry? What is it going to take to make you think that you’re the same as anyone else in rights, that you didn’t deserve what she did to you?”

Harry held his eyes, and felt another box fly apart as if struck by a Blasting Curse. “This, I think,” he said simply, and then turned and faced the wall. Draco had the good sense to duck behind the pendulum again.

Harry took a deep breath. This time, the air in his lungs seemed to turn to scales. Freezing rage ran along his arms, and manifested as coils, as tails, as hissing, lifted heads, as venomous fangs. Harry whirled, and serpents, magical and mundane, flew from him in every direction, sliding off his shoulders, vomiting themselves up from his throat, flying like sling-stones off his spine. They sped towards the ianthinum and the void at the end of the Room, but there were always more where they came from. Harry’s emotions choked him and sped out of him, manifested and choked him again, appeared and then cleared from his throat, until he could finally scream.

“I hate her!”

The words themselves seemed to crack the air. Harry watched as a jagged lightning-bolt shape sped towards the wall, opening the Room up to—nothing behind it, but the crystal ate that, and grew a little closer. Harry could see the silver worms under the blue-purple rock brightening with contentment.

Draco made a small sound that turned Harry back towards him. “You hate who?” he asked.

“My mother,” said Harry clearly, and pushed.

The fear he’d felt of saying that shredded and collapsed to the floor in limp rags. He remembered Lily telling him how she’d become a part of the sacrificial ethics Dumbledore preached, and heard, for the first time, as a response to it, not his own pity thinking that he should heal her mind and forgive her, but Connor’s voice saying that Lily hadn’t been under a web, but Harry had, and he’d still done better than she had.

“Lily Potter,” Harry whispered. “I hate her. I hate that she made me into what I am. I hate that I can’t just get rid of her. I hate that she’ll always have marked me, no matter what I do.”

His emotions altered, from the choking serpent-spit to wild contempt like the lash of lightning on a mountaintop.

“And I despise my father,” Harry continued viciously, not knowing he would say the words until he did. “Could he be any more of a coward? Edith Bulstrode is stronger than he is. Connor is stronger than he is. I thought he was going to change, but he couldn’t cling to and keep that change. And if I can’t keep my own change, my own promises, then I’m going to be no better than he is.”

“Harry, don’t say that,” Draco said, coming forward to the edge of the pendulum, and then hesitating again. “You’ll always be stronger than he is.”

Harry scowled at him. “Don’t interrupt.”

Draco shut his mouth.
“Not right now,” Harry added, and tried to keep his tone light, but he couldn’t manage it. He could feel himself prowling back and forth, his scorn rising and fluttering behind him like ragged wings. “Merlin. He lied last year, when he said that he’d always loved me, but he didn’t know what Lily was doing to me. He doesn’t love me. Of course, at this point, who can tell? He was saying something he thought would save his pride, I think, and keep him from being exposed to the shame and ridicule of being a child abuser. But maybe he meant it at the time. He couldn’t keep it up, though.” Harry heard his own voice descend to a hiss. “No matter. I cannot trust him. I am done with him.”

His thoughts swung again. This time, he knew what he was going to do, but he had to pause, to reflect, to reconsider whether it was a good idea. Then he shook his head wildly, impatiently. No, and no, and no again. I don’t want to deal with him again. He can have all the second chances in Tullianum that he wants. I don’t care if Connor visits him, or ignores him. I don’t want him to die, still not now, but I don’t want him as part of my life anymore.

He glanced to the side, and saw the pendulum at the top of its swing. He moved under it and held out his hand, hearing Draco’s shocked gasp, ignoring it. By the time Draco grasped his shoulders and pulled him out of the blade’s path, the edge had already cut his palm. So sharp was it that Harry didn’t feel the pain until several moments after the cut had appeared.

Harry squeezed it to remove some of the blood, and four drops fell to the floor of the Room. Harry considered whether four would be enough, then decided that he would make it be enough. He was in a wild, fey, impatient mood, and he didn’t want to wait any longer.

“I renounce what James Potter has given me,” he said calmly. “From this moment, I renounce all claim to Lux Aeterna and the house at Godric’s Hollow.” One of the drops of blood froze into a pebble, and Harry nodded. “From this moment, I renounce all other Potter inheritances that might possibly pass to me as his son.” The second drop burned. “From this moment, I renounce all claim to my middle name, which is his.” The third drop turned into water. “From this moment, I renounce all claim to my last name, which is his.”

The fourth drop became wind, and a deep, violent, bitter, sweet note of ferocious song. Harry tilted his head back and let it wash over him. The wind became indistinguishable from the swing of the pendulum in a moment. Harry stood there for a long moment, conscious of feeling lighter than he had just a short time before.

“Harry,” Draco whispered. “You do realize that you just left yourself penniless, don’t you?”

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at him. “And nameless, I know.” He shook his head. “I’ll survive, thanks to my magic—“

“And to me, you git,” Draco cut in. “Not to mention all the other people who would be more than happy to help you.”

Harry felt an instinctive revulsion rear up in him. But he looked at the revulsion, and it was revulsion Lily had taught him, to think that he didn’t deserve gifts and a sense of belonging. He had told Draco the truth: he didn’t fit in with the Malfoys or anyone else just yet. But perhaps he could, someday, and it would be stupid of him to reject that chance, just like the revulsion was stupid.

“Thank you,” he said, and made himself accept it.

He turned, and began walking back and forth again. He almost wanted to swear a vow that he wouldn’t use his magic to interfere with the trial, even if execution was declared for both his parents tomorrow, but the more he thought about it, the more he thought that was unwise. He had to make the decision on his own, or it was worthless. Yes, in some ways he’d have to lay himself under strictures—he grimaced to think of what he’d already decided he’d have to do after they were out of the Room—but he didn’t think this was one of them.

No. I’ll make the promise to myself, and not anyone else. That way, I’ll always have to be vigilant and clear-eyed, and watch myself. I know that I’ll still want to stop the Wizengamot if they decide on death tomorrow, but I have to see if I can actually hold myself back.

He must. He had to. He had to do this, and in some ways it was like surrendering to a law of the inevitable, reassuring and freeing, and in some ways it was like riding a thestral he couldn’t see, plunging into the darkness and trusting that there was something to catch him, from moment to moment.

He took a deep breath, and said, “I hate my mother so much. But I have to go tomorrow. I still know that I’d rejoice if they freed her, because of that part of me that loves her, even though I don’t want to come into contact with her again.” He glanced at Draco. “This time, if you think I’m doing something stupid that’s hurting me more, then you have my permission to force a Calming Draught down my throat, to try and get me to see reason.”
“But not to use a sleeping potion on you,” said Draco, slow realization creeping across his face. “Or remove you from the courtroom.”

Harry shook his head. “I have to watch this. I have to watch if she—if they kill them, Draco. I have to.”

Draco closed his eyes. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, Harry. I think you’ll break.”

“I know,” said Harry softly. “And I don’t think it’s justice, that’s why I’d break. But I can’t stop the Wizengamot at this point short of compulsion. I won’t use that. And I know—” Why was this part suddenly so hard to say? “I know that I can’t be objective,” he finished, miserably. “Maybe they do have some points, and I just can’t see them. Maybe—oh, damnit.”

And he was crying again, but Draco was there, holding him up again. Whooosh-thrum, the pendulum sang, and Harry clung to Draco and cried fiercely, out of anger as much as pain.

“Maybe they were right,” he whispered, when he could speak again. “Maybe you were right. Maybe I was being abused, and denying that it was abuse.”

He felt a great shudder run through Draco, the kind of motion a prisoner might make when getting up after being bound to a rack and stretching. Harry held on to him, and watched the walls part in his mind. If he was riding a thestral he couldn’t see, it was carrying him high and far and fast now, and Harry couldn’t tell for sure if the light ahead was sunrise or sunset.

I’ll just have to take the chance, won’t I? It’s all new now. It’s all changing. I thought everything was settled after I resculpted my mind, but it’s never settled, it can’t be settled. I’m going to have to change from moment to moment. I’m going to have to listen to Draco and Snape and all the others and evaluate what they say, not just trust that they’re right or I am. I’m going to have to refrain from using my magic some of the time, and use it at others, sternly enough that my enemies will realize they shouldn’t try to kill anyone on my side. I’m going to have to lead.

This time, he was the one who shuddered, and his magic spun around him like thrumming thestral wings, so chaotic that Harry couldn’t tell what shape it formed from moment to moment. It bore him over a changing world. He closed his eyes and stood in the middle of rushing black wind.

But he was also firmly in the middle of Draco’s arms, and that was what kept him grounded, spinning around a center instead of just flying loose and wild in the storm.

I’ve fallen once. I’ll go on falling, and trust that he’s there to catch me.

Harry hoped he would grow to trust others as much, in time—though he wasn’t entirely sure Draco would want that—but it would have to begin here, with this one person. He trusted Draco with his life, his sanity, his weakness. Draco had taken the central place in his life that Connor had once held, but Harry couldn’t just serve him the way he held Connor.

Merlin, I’m in love with him.

The realization almost made Harry lift his head and jerk away, but then he burrowed in once more and clung close. Draco grasped his hand and squeezed tightly. Harry chuckled.

“Don’t damage that,” he whispered. “I have to write a letter when we’re out of here.”

“A letter?” Draco pulled back enough to look at him.

Harry nodded. “A letter to—the Seers. I can’t go to the Sanctuary, not when there’s a war on—”

“Yes, you can—” Draco began.

“No, I can’t,” Harry disagreed, vehemently enough to shut Draco up. “It’s too isolated, and news takes too long to travel there. But maybe one of the Seers would agree to come here, and speak with me. I think I want them to now. Isn’t that odd?” he added, meditatively.

“No,” said Draco, who looked as though Christmas had come early.

Harry snorted. “Yes, you wouldn’t think so.”
He pulled back, and closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, and felt around in himself. He couldn’t feel any more boxes, any more need to explode with magic right now. He’d renounced his father, and committed himself to surviving the trial, and to at least considering that what other people said about his parents had more basis in reality than his own beliefs. He’d admitted he hated them. He’d had an argument with Draco, and fallen in love, and come to the realization that there wasn’t just one course he could take and have it all be better. He thought that was enough for one hour.

“I think we’re done here,” he said.

*Whoosh-thrum*, the pendulum sang, and then it embedded itself in the floor, and stopped. The door opened.

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Draco didn’t believe it—he didn’t dare let himself believe it, in some ways—until he came back into their bedroom from using the loo and saw Harry sitting with his Transfiguration textbook braced on his knee, under a piece of parchment, on which he steadily scribbled. Then he had to creep around to Harry’s shoulder and read what the letter already said.

Dear Vera,

I know that you made the offer to me, once, to come to the Sanctuary. I still don’t think I can do that, but will you, or another Seer, send me post, or come to Hogwarts to speak with me? I think I’m ready to speak to you about the state of my soul now. I’d prefer you, out of all of them, but as long as you’re sure that the Seer sent is equally gifted and compassionate, then—

Draco had to put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry looked up at him, cocking his head.

“What?”

Draco said, “I love you, that’s all,” while around him he felt the wind of the future catch them up, and hurtle them forward.

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Chapter Forty-Five: Spake As His Soul Bore Witness

Harry knew there were eyes on him. He would always be sensitive to that feeling, he thought, and the more because of his new change. Since he couldn’t ease the staring with hiding and shrinking away, it would be harder to bear for a time.

He sat down at breakfast and ate his porridge. He knew people were murmuring rumors of the trial yesterday, and poking each other to go up and ask him questions about it. Harry ignored them. He knew the *Daily Prophet* had arrived, and from the way that people went quiet, the story on the front page must be about him. Harry ignored that. He kept his gaze on the porridge. The other Slytherins didn’t bother him, though they gave him many puzzled glances, clearly unable to comprehend why he would be up this early when he didn’t have to attend classes.

“Harry, you prat,” Draco said from behind him, in a nasty tone. “You could have awakened me and told me that you were coming down to the Great Hall for breakfast.” He dropped into the chair beside Harry’s and glared at him, before helping himself moodily to a plate of sausages, as if to say that Harry could eat bland things, but he didn’t have to.

Harry shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep. I figured you would want to.” He ate another spoonful of porridge.

Draco lowered his voice. “But you could have avoided all—this.” He waved one hand to encompass the staring and the rustling and the whispering and the other signs of a bunch of people too interested in his business. “Didn’t you want to do that?”

“I’ve got to get used to it sooner or later,” said Harry quietly, and met Draco’s eyes. “Since, after all, I don’t plan to hide who I am any more.”

The smile that spread across Draco’s face at that was really quite frightening. Harry found himself eyeing it as cautiously as some of the Ravenclaws watched him. Draco leaned nearer and stared hard into his eyes, then turned away and went back to his sausages, now helped along by a generous goblet of pumpkin juice.

Harry stared at the back of his head, then shrugged and started eating again. He supposed he would get used to *that* in time, too, at least if Draco planned to do it on a regular basis.
Harry paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth. He knew that voice, but it wasn’t one he’d expected to hear. He carefully set the spoon back in the bowl, and the bowl a good distance from his elbow, before turning around. Then he had to lean sideways, to stop Draco from going for his wand at once. Really, I’m not the only one who needs to make some changes. I know why he’s overprotective of me right now, but he knows what I cursed her with.

“What do you want, Parsons?” he asked the Ravenclaw, who stood behind him, shielding herself with the Prophet as if paper would somehow protect her from powerful magic.

“I—I want to know if it’s true,” she said, and fluttered the paper at him, too rapidly for Harry to make out the headline or the photograph on the front page. Luckily, Margaret elaborated a moment later. “I want to know if you really are the Boy-Who-Lived, the one who bounced back the Killing Curse.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Connor had come up to him yesterday evening and said he was sorry again, but wasn’t that just like a Gryffindor, to blurt out something like that because he got angry? “Yes, I am,” he said, and tried to return to his porridge.

“But that changes everything,” Margaret told his back.

“Why?” Harry glanced over his shoulder, not trying to hide the dislike in his eyes. If she didn’t know how he felt about her by now, she was truly mad. “Because you think the Boy-Who-Lived must be inherently of the Light?”

Margaret frowned. “Aren’t you?”

“For Merlin’s sake,” said Harry. “You were the one who thought I was Dark, evil enough to curse, for getting your Headmaster in trouble. And now you’re ready to reverse everything that you believed about me, for the sake of one article? Come off it.” He took a bite of porridge, and then said out of the corner of his mouth, when he’d swallowed, “Draco, put your wand down.”

“Just one hex,” said Draco.

Harry shook his head. “She can’t use magic against you anyway, and it’s not fair, considering that other curse I put on her.”

“But I want to,” said Draco. He didn’t have a dreamy expression on his face, only a determined one. Harry knew he might choose a pain curse, though Margaret hadn’t done anything that awful to Harry himself; she’d hurt Argutus more. “And you want to,” Draco added, causing Harry to reflect that this conscious effort to drop his mask and show more of his emotions wasn’t always an unmitigated good.

“Put it down,” said Harry. He spoke to Margaret without turning his head again. “I didn’t defeat Voldemort because of any inherent Light I have. The decisions I’ve made between that night and now are what put me in Slytherin and made me into the person you said you despised. So, yes, it’s true, but you don’t have to let it change your mind. Think differently about me, think the same, I don’t care. Just let me eat my breakfast in peace, Parsons.”

Eat my breakfast in peace, and not think about having to be in the courtroom in an hour. They’ll do the sentencing today, I think. There wasn’t as much witness testimony to get through as I thought there would be, since no one testified for the defense.

Harry could feel his stomach dropping away from him as he thought about it. The Wizengamot had a good chance of sentencing at least his mother to death; whispers he’d heard yesterday and disregarded were rushing back to him now. The testimony’s many interruptions and irregularities had all been of the kind that flowed against her.

Harry wondered for a moment what he could have done to save her, then shook his head. He knew one answer to that; the magic slumbering around him in shimmering waves could have changed their minds, yes. And he had already said that he wouldn’t walk that path, that it would make him too much like Dumbledore.

I didn’t know that I would still want to save her so much, he reflected dismally, as he bit into a scone. I hated her so much last night that I forgot I also love her.

“Harry?” Draco whispered into his ear. “Are you well? You’re shaking.”

Harry shook his head. “Not going to vomit,” he murmured. “Just thinking about what they’ll do to my parents.” He wondered distantly if he should have been more concerned over James, but he was fairly certain James would survive. The crimes he was accused of were less pernicious, and when he’d asked Connor yesterday what James’s testimony had been like, his brother’s
report eased his worries further. The Wizengamot would laugh at James and give him imprisonment in Tullianum. Harry had already learned yesterday, in the Room, that he could live with that.

“Are you sure you should go today?” Draco brought him back from his racing thoughts, with a gentle touch on his arm and a fierce look in his eyes.

“Yes,” Harry whispered. “I do owe them a witnessing, Draco.”

“Why?”

“Because I would owe anyone a witnessing,” said Harry. “Imagine having your magic stripped from you alone, Draco, knowing that everyone in the audience hated you.”

“But you hate them, too,” said Draco.

“And love them.”

Draco clamped his lips together, his nostrils flaring, and Harry remembered his reaction to that declaration last night. He wondered if they were going to have a row during breakfast. But Draco just nodded, in the end, and ate several pieces of sausage to relieve his feelings.

“Potter?”

Harry tensed his muscles to keep himself from startling. He’d had no idea that Margaret was still there, since she hadn’t said anything. “Yes?” he asked mildly, refusing to face her.

“I hope your parents live.” This time, Harry heard her walk away.

“Bloody bitch,” Draco said, the insult the more vicious for being so soft, not less. “She probably means that she hopes they live to hurt you more. Bloody bitch. I hate her so much, Harry.”

“Aren’t you full of light and cheerfulness at the world this morning?” Harry asked, while his mind traced the outline of Margaret’s words again. “And I don’t think she meant that, or she would have said she hoped they went free. She may actually want them to live because she knows I would be upset if they died, Draco.”

Upset…does not quite cover it. The thought of their deaths set Harry’s world spinning dizzily on its axis. Harry covered it with short, thick bites of his scone, and a few swallows of pumpkin juice. The dizziness wasn’t the kind that would cause him to be sick. Harry hoped.

“She doesn’t,” Draco insisted. “She can’t mean you good.”

“I stand by what I said about light and cheerfulness.” Harry could feel himself creating a box again, to conceal his terror of what would happen. Carefully, he shut his eyes and stopped it. He made boxes clumsily now anyway, as he had seen yesterday. He didn’t want this one bursting open in the middle of the trial.

But I can use a mask to conceal what I’m feeling just enough to let myself appear calm. And if I see a chance to do my parents good, then I’ll take it. No magic, no compulsion at all, nothing that will hurt another person or me. But I don’t know what the Wizengamot’s decided, or how far along they might be towards sentencing. There may still be hope.

Harry wondered if he would feel this same painful sensation of standing on a precipice and not knowing whether a long drop or a gentle step lay below him before every major decision, before every battle.

If so, then that’s what I’ll have to feel. Harry shivered, and picked up his spoon again, while a cold wind seemed to speed along his skin. Maybe, if Vera or another Seer arrives soon, they can help me work through this. Realistically, though, Harry knew that his letter would take at least two weeks to reach the Sanctuary. He would have to cope on his own for some time.

I can do that. I meant what I decided. I’m not going back on any part of it. Harry hesitated as something else brushed against his mind. If I meant what I decided, then I should be able to take comfort from Draco. I don’t think he would mind. Cautiously, he leaned towards Draco.

Draco was more than happy to wind an arm around his waist and attend to eating his breakfast with one hand. Harry sighed. The
warmth of Draco’s touch seemed to alleviate the dizziness, and let him eat more.

*And I really do deserve this as much as anyone else?* That was still a shy, fugitive thought, darting across his mind from one hiding place to another. *I suppose I might. How strange.*

* * *

Draco kept a close eye on Harry as they entered the Wizengamot’s courtroom. Strong as Harry was, wonderful and marvelous as the changes he had made yesterday were, this was still the day that might see the death of his parents, or at least their imprisonment and the loss of magic from the one who still had it. Draco would have been more worried if Harry looked like an ice statue.

He didn’t. Harry had bitten his lip raw already. His hand frequently closed into a fist, though Draco got him to open it by pretending that he needed to have his hair stroked. He lifted his head as if to peer over the heads of the people in front of them, though not even the full Wizengamot was there yet, and certainly not the prisoners.

“Draco. Harry.”

Draco turned his head and met Snape’s gaze. The professor had apparently stayed so late at the Ministry last night that he’d wound up sleeping there. His eyes were sharply alert, though, and he held himself like a coiling serpent. Draco could imagine that this day was as much a relief to him as it was a source of stress to Harry. At least the trial would end, and one of the two spells he’d launched into motion would have found its target. There remained Dumbledore’s trial in March to deal with, but that was distant enough to allow Harry at least some peace.

And Snape some time to reconcile with him, which Draco knew was on his mind. No one outside Slytherin House would believe the way those dark eyes looked as they rested on Harry.

They narrowed, though, and Draco knew why. Snape would be examining Harry’s eyes, his emotions, for traces of Occlumency pools, and not finding any. Harry had gone unshielded today.

Snape’s eyes moved from Harry’s face to his, and they bore a clear command. Draco nodded. “I’ll be right back, Harry,” he whispered, and then stood and followed his Head of House down the row of chairs and towards the doors of the courtrooms.

Snape leaned on the wall in the corridor outside and cast a Silencing Charm around them. “What has happened?” he demanded.

Draco smiled. He wondered if the professor had had any good news since the trial began. He doubted it. It felt better than he knew it should to be the bearer of that good news. “Harry faced himself in the Room of Requirement yesterday,” he said simply. “He was able to say that he hated his parents, and he cried, and he made a commitment to facing the future with me.” He paused to savor Snape’s stunned expression, before finishing with the two pieces of news he knew would mean the most. “And he rejected his last and middle names, and he willingly called upon a Seer.”

“What.”

Snape didn’t say the word as if he were disbelieving, but more as if he dared not hope this was true. Draco nodded. “No one suggested it to him,” he said. “I certainly didn’t. But he bears only his first name now. He despises his father too much to receive that legacy. And he doesn’t want to go to the Sanctuary, but he did write to Vera, the Seer he met last year when you were—away—and asked her to write to him or come to Hogwarts.”

“What happened to him?” Snape whispered.

“He really, really doesn’t want to be like Dumbledore,” said Draco, with a shrug. He at least understood Harry’s goal of not ever using his magic to compel or hurt another person, though he thought it unrealistic and wished that Harry would spend his magic on himself a bit more. “The temptation to become that way scared him so much he was able to drag himself through some of his fears.”

“I wish I had been there.”

Snape’s voice was pure longing for that one moment, a yearning that Draco had only heard in other voices before when someone discussed originating a spell or being close to the source of mighty magic. He understood it perfectly, though. If Snape had been the one to go with Harry yesterday, he would be feeling that same envy himself.
“He’ll reconcile with you,” he said softly. “He’ll forgive you for this.”


“Professor Snape,” said Draco, wondering at the strangeness of his taking a comforter’s role to this man even as he did so, “he can forgive—that woman. I think he can forgive you. And if it takes some time to come, it’ll just show that it’s genuine, not the trained emotion that he feels for her.”

Snape closed his eyes and said nothing for a long moment. Draco shook his head. You may not feel that you belong anywhere but with the family who bore you, Harry, but, Merlin, open your eyes. Snape would give everything he has to be your father. In a sense, he’s already given up his invulnerability, his comfort, even his capacity for objective thought.

It was strange that he knew that without empathy, and it was strange that this was happening, and the strangeness thrummed in his blood. But Draco wasn’t tempted to walk away from it. After the Room of Requirement, strangeness alone wasn’t going to make him flinch.

Then Snape straightened with a snap, and all his masks came down again. “Thank you, Draco,” he said coolly. “Did he say anything about what measures he is willing to let us take, if he becomes upset again?”

“A Calming Potion,” said Draco. “Forced down his throat, if need be. But he gave that permission only to me.” He couldn’t quite help snapping the words. As Harry improved, other people might think they could approach him more freely, require things of him that he hadn’t given so far. Draco was determined that some of those gifts would be his. His jealousy would be unfathomable to Harry, at least for a while. Draco didn’t care. This was the way he was. “No sleeping potions, nor binding spells, nor removal from the room.”

Snape gave a faint half-smile, and Draco wondered for a moment if he were seen as much as he saw. “Very well, then.” The professor put a hand in his robe pocket, and Draco tensed out of instinct grown paranoid over Ravenclaws, but Snape merely handed over several blue vials. “This is all I carry at the moment.”

Draco accepted them. “Thank you, sir,” he said.

A movement, and a wave of people began to flow past them. Snape lifted his head, and his eyes grew more distant. “They finished the testimony yesterday,” he said quietly. “There will be a summary of the case, after they bring in the prisoners, and then the Wizengamot votes on their fate.”

“What do you think it will be, sir?” Draco asked. He knew what he thought, but Snape had seen far more of the testimony than he had.

Snape’s mouth pulled into a thin line, and his eyes glittered with some emotion that, for Draco, had no name. “For James Potter? Stripping of his magic, and imprisonment for life in Tullianum.” He shook his head. “For that woman? Execution.”

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Harry watched the Wizengamot members settle into place. Amelia Bones still led them, he saw. She had taken her place behind the questioner’s desk, and watched the doors impatiently, as if longing for the moment when they could close them.

Harry glanced swiftly around. A great many people watched him, but none hovered on the edges of their chairs, the way he thought witnesses who had yet to bear their witness would. That meant—he thought it had to mean—that the testimony was done with. From the books he had read, he knew Madam Bones would speak for a few moments, reminding everyone of the major points from the case, before the vote started.

And it meant he had a chance.

Harry could feel his palm begin to sweat. That was all right. He controlled his face, and he doubted anyone had cast a spell that would let them smell his sweat, specifically, across this distance. And if they had? Could anyone really doubt that he was nervous, this morning?

He caught Connor’s eye as he arrived. His brother smiled at him, a nervous look, but his eyes glittered with determination. Harry knew Connor wouldn’t speak against whatever punishment the Wizengamot decided on—unless they released his parents, in which case he would probably be the first around the balcony railing to strike at Madam Bones. Harry had seen the expression on his face yesterday. It was Connor’s “I am just barely restraining myself from violence” look.
And he only wears that when he’s really, genuinely angry. I’ll have to apologize for asking him to lie.

Draco touched his shoulder and his hair, then slid into place beside him. “Professor Snape says that the Aurors will bring your parents in just a few moments,” he murmured. “Are you ready?”

“I bloody well hope so.” And Harry did. His plan was a light, fragile thing, made of leaves, really, and anything could destroy it. If he didn’t get to put it into play, which was entirely possible, then its failure might destroy him. He had to be ready for either occurrence.

He could feel Draco’s odd look boring into the side of his face. He ignored that, in favor of watching the lower courtroom doors as they opened and the Aurors marched Lily and James Potter in.

James walked with his head bowed and his gaze fixed on the floor. Harry thought that he didn’t fully understand what he’d got himself into, even now, and what a decision against him by the Wizengamot could mean. He felt a stirring of pity inside him for the man. He paused, then allowed it. He had expressed his contempt yesterday afternoon. This was a new day, what could be the last day of at least one of his parents’ lives. He would treat it with the seriousness it deserved. If pity was the closest he could get to compassion for James, he would take it.

Lily walked with her head up, and turning from side to side. Several times, her eyes went to the area of the galleries where he’d sat yesterday. Harry was a good distance back from that now, though, with Draco planted slightly in front of him, and straining as if he’d like to be completely in front. If Lily felt disappointed at not finding him, she didn’t show it. She merely looked ahead, and wore a bored expression as the Aurors bound her to the second prisoner’s chair beside James.

“The spectators will stop talking,” said Madam Bones, with a Sonorus charm enhancing her voice. Harry was amazed at how quickly the chattering stopped. Then he realized that most of the room was probably eager to see his parents sentenced, and clenched his hand into a fist.

Madam Bones remained silent for a moment herself, surveying the room regally, like an eagle from a mountaintop. Harry knew this was the best chance he would ever have. He stood.

“Madam Bones,” he said clearly, ignoring Draco’s hissed, “What are you doing?”

The questioner turned and looked at him, blinking a bit, as if he’d woken her from a dream of justice. “Mr. Potter—“ she began.

“Not Potter, anymore.” Harry shook his head. “I renounced my surname yesterday afternoon, Madam. Harry will do.”

He heard chains rattle in the middle of the floor as James apparently jerked against his bonds. Harry didn’t care. His attention was for Madam Bones, and what she might or might not allow him to do. She was frowning slightly, as if he had handed her a Firewhiskey when she wanted butterbeer.

“Harry, then,” she said. “Surely you know that this is irregular. The time for witnesses to speak is past. I will summarize the case for the Wizengamot, and then will come the vote and the sentencing.”

“I know that, Madam,” said Harry, “but this whole trial has been irregular. I ask for your indulgence one more time.” Draco tugged at his sleeve. Harry ignored him, and remained on his feet. His hand did slip when he tried to put it on his robes, so slick with sweat was it. Harry didn’t let that show on his face.

As he’d hoped, the odd, formal way he spoke intrigued Madam Bones. She nodded to him.

“I would like to ask permission to speak one final defense of my parents,” Harry said, making sure to project his voice to all parts of the courtroom, raising it louder and adding a touch of magic to it when the buzz from the shocked and the appalled and the amused nearly overrode his words. “I give you my word that I shall use no magic to influence the vote or the sentencing. I wish only to speak. I was not able to finish my own testimony yesterday, and then I was part of two witnesses’ performances that I should not have been. I would like the opportunity to give my own speech, in full. If you and the Wizengamot will allow it, of course, Madam,” Harry went on, turning back to Madam Bones.

Madam Bones seemed entirely at a loss for words. She opened her mouth, then shut it swiftly again, as if she didn’t want to leave her jaw hanging open. And then she looked at the Wizengamot for guidance.

Harry’s hopes climbed rapidly. His chances increased with every moment she didn’t just refuse.
Draco tugged violently enough at him that Harry had to pay attention. “What are you doing?” he repeated. “Don’t do this.”

“I want to,” said Harry gently. He wondered, afterwards, if it was the gentleness or the wording that made Draco stop, and sit up, and stare him full in the face, instead of just obliviously insisting that he was wrong and Draco right.

“Merlin and his demons, Harry,” said Draco, which wasn’t an oath that Harry had heard him use before. He breathed out in short huffs, and with each huff, one of his fingers let loose of the sleeve of Harry’s robes. “All right.”

Harry nodded, and looked back up at the front of the room. Madam Bones was speaking in heated whispers with someone who had leaned forward from his seat. Harry blinked when the man sat back again, and he realized it was Scrimgeour. Usually, he could sense the Minister’s presence at once. He radiated power that had nothing to do with magic. This time, he had kept himself to the background.

_In fact, why did he let Madam Bones take over at all? Yes, his moderating the trial might have been a conflict of interest, but everything else about this trial has been unfair and anything but disinterested._

Harry shook his head. Perhaps it was Scrimgeour’s trust in him to do the right thing, a trust that seemed to have been restored now that he knew Harry wasn’t the one who had used the compulsion spell.

“We will allow it,” said Madam Bones, and Harry had more proof of that trust.

“Thank you, Madam.” Harry inclined his head towards her, and towards the Wizengamot, and then made for the staircase that would take him down into the main courtroom. Draco probably _did_ make a grab for his robes then; Harry didn’t think he’d realized where he intended to stand. But Harry slipped past it, and made his way briskly forward.

He could feel his heartbeat, thin and chill, in his mouth. He felt the importance of the moment threaten to freeze him and make him unable to say anything.

_But, no. I won’t allow that. That would be the only disaster. This is a slim, fragile hope at best, and I might stammer and I might phrase things wrongly, and that would be all right. But not speaking at all, now that I have the chance, is indefensible._

He reached the bottom of the stairs, and found himself suddenly closer to both the man who had sired him and the woman who had borne him than he’d been for five months. Harry lifted his gaze and moved resolutely forward. He met their eyes, which was harder than deciding to speak for them in the first place.

James’s eyes were haunted with warring emotions, dashing and colliding like stormclouds. Sometimes he looked worried, sometimes hopeful, sometimes upset, sometimes defeated. Harry wished the courageous emotions would win, but he doubted they could, at this point in James’s life.

Lily’s eyes held quiet satisfaction, and she nodded to him as he came to a stop next to James’s chair. “That’s it, Harry,” she whispered. “I knew you would do this.”

_You didn’t know a fucking thing_, Harry thought, and held her eyes, and forced himself to remember yesterday, when she had encouraged him to break her chains. She wanted him to forget that she had tried to incite him against the court. She wanted to take credit for his decision to use only words today. Harry wouldn’t let her.

His hatred howled at him. He pushed it gently away. He would no longer deny it, but it didn’t have control of his life. Yesterday had been its day.

Today, he spoke out of love.

He turned and met Madam Bones’s eyes. She shrugged. “You may as well go ahead, Mr.—Harry,” she said, voice twisting oddly.

Harry nodded, and felt wind come rushing towards him and mantle him in cold wings. He was riding above the darkness on a thestral again, not knowing where he was going to land, not knowing how to stop, not knowing how to turn aside—

_So you’re alive, then? Good._

Harry pulled himself through the irony of the voice in his mind, which sounded a lot like Vera’s, and reached for the words he needed.
“I was abused,” he said quietly. “You know that now. You’ve heard the explanation of my mother’s motives for doing so. I doubt you found them adequate.” An explosion of snorts from the Wizengamot indicated that he’d been correct. “You’ve heard how my father didn’t know of the abuse, and then ignored it and its consequences when he was made aware of it.”

Harry heard tears gathering thickly in the back of his voice. He considered, then let them sound, but not pour down his face. He wouldn’t try the equivalent of Connor’s little trick in his testimony yesterday. He would, instead, show them what he was feeling, stripping off his mask and stepping into the world.

“I can feel hatred. I can allow that to myself. I can feel pain, and dread the road ahead, since it’s going to take me so long to recover.”

“Harry,” Lily hissed out of the corner of her mouth. “Harry, what are you doing?”

“But I can also feel love,” Harry continued. “There are moments in my parents’ lives when none of this happened. Their abuse of me does not define them, though I think it’s been allowed to do so, in this courtroom.” A few of the Wizengamot members actually shuffled their feet at that. Interesting. So they know they’re not objective, then, and they just didn’t care. “You’ve heard part of the explanation for my mother’s behavior, but not the whole of it. She made the decisions she did out of fear and a desire to belong. Albus Dumbledore told her when she was quite young, thirteen or fourteen, that she had a destiny, to carry the wizarding world into the future. My mother was a Muggleborn, and most of the students in school didn’t accept her or were afraid of what it would mean to relate to her, during the first years of Voldemort’s rise. She, and several other Muggleborn students, loved the idea of serving as sacrifices to rescue the wizarding world from itself, to keep it alive when Dumbledore convinced them no one else would. Think of it. Thirteen years old, and she could do what neither adults nor her pureblood classmates could. She was excited, of course.”

“Harry, stop this,” Lily whispered. “I knew what I was choosing. Do not try to blame Albus. He taught me ethics, not wound the rope around my brain that you are claiming. He did not abuse me.”

“None of that excuses her,” Harry said. “But it explains her.

“And my father… he was afraid. He told me the story himself of how he went slightly mad when hearing of how the Lestranges attacked and tortured Frank and Alice Longbottom. This was in the aftermath of the attack on us. He went after Bellatrix and Rodolphus and used Dark spells on them.” No need to mention that it was an Unforgivable. He’s not on trial for that. “He feared himself. He removed himself from Auror work the next day, and spent the next decade with us in Godric’s Hollow behind isolation wards, growing steadily more and more fearful of the outside world. He didn’t have the purpose that Lily and I did, to keep him going, and he didn’t have my brother’s innocent conviction that he, too, was destined to save the world. He thought he’d played some part in the saving, and failed badly.

“None of that excuses him. But it explains him.

“The saddest thing about all of this is the wreck of our lives.” Harry tilted his head towards his parents. So I think of them, one last time and no more. “So many people we could have been, so many things we could have done, so many other roads we might have walked, broken and stripped away.” He had to close his eyes for a moment to hold back the tears, remembering what Vera had said to him when she saw his soul, about how Harry valued the endless unfolding of possibilities for other people, so long as they did not infringe on the freedom of others. They could have grown out of themselves, become so much more, in such profusion of beauty, than they did. Yes, I mourn that, and always will. For them, and for Sirius, and for Peter, and for Dumbledore, and for me, for all the people we might have been.

“I’m in a position to recover, somewhat. I was a victim of abuse, and, as my brother said yesterday, managed to step out of it and break the webs that held me. I have people who will continue to help me heal. But all Lily and James Potter have is a mentor who sacrificed them as he did so much else, friends who have turned their backs on them in justified disgust, a son who hates them for not letting him make his own choices, and me.”

Harry turned to face Lily and James. He had to. The motion of his speech, the spiral it was taking, required it. James just stared at him as if he had never seen him before. Lily’s eyes were filled with tears, and she was shaking her head back and forth.

“Harry,” she said. “You cannot—you cannot be free. You can’t have broken all the webs. You will be a Dark Lord if you do.”

Harry looked directly into her eyes, and answered her, and answered the staring, silent Wizengamot up above.

“I plead for them because I cannot help but plead for them, because they are living souls in the world who have no one else, and I
love them. They have done harm, and they must be punished, and their healing is beyond my power. But I can ask that they be left alone, that the wreck of their lives not be ground into smaller pieces.”

Harry glanced up again at the Wizengamot, over his shoulder. “And I can plead for myself. It was for my sake the charges were filed, that the case was brought like this against both my parents and Albus Dumbledore.” Do you hear me, Snape? I understand, now, why you did it. Understanding is not forgiveness, but it may be a beginning of it. “A healing and a cleansing has begun in me with this trial. I can ask that it not be paired with sorrow as love and hatred are paired in my emotions with my parents. I ask for the Wizengamot to consider life in Tullianum for both of them. Abroad in the world, my parents can grind down other lives. Locked in one place, they can at least dwell with their own hearts, in their own silence, and rend and be rent no longer.”

The silence that had fallen was more still than death, and so Harry thought the entire court heard Lily’s reply to him. “Do you even know what you’re asking for, Harry? Why are you doing this, if you’re not going to ask for our freedom?”

Harry faced her again. The green eyes were the eyes of the woman who loved him, the woman who hated him, the woman who’d shared a secret and wonderful fate with him, the woman who had trained him in things that Harry now found so disgusting.

The woman who, more than any other, had made him what he was, but not what he might become.

“Because my own soul requires it,” Harry answered.

He turned back to the Wizengamot. “I have nothing else to say. Thank you.”

He climbed the staircase. His heartbeat sang in his ears, thin and high as the cry of a diving seabird. He fell limply into Draco’s arms when he reached the top of the steps, but then clung like a starfish when he realized just who was holding him.

“Harry,” Draco said into his ear, and no more.

Harry let himself be escorted back to his chair. He sat down, and leaned on Draco’s shoulder, and didn’t listen as Madam Bones summarized the case in a strained voice for the Wizengamot. He didn’t listen, either, as the vote went through condemning Lily and James as guilty, and thus worthy of sentencing, not freedom. That, they had had no chance to avoid, with the evidence of their crimes everywhere and no one denying they had actually happened. Besides, not a single person voted for innocence, vaguely surprising Harry. He supposed Dumbledore’s spell might have influenced the trial less than he originally thought.

And then came the sentencing.


“Tullianum,” said Madam Marchbanks, and Madam Bones nodded, and her gaze moved on.

Harry closed his eyes, but relaxed when he realized that there were twenty-eight votes for Tullianum. The Wizengamot had fifty-one members. Even if the rest of them voted for death, there was no way that James would not be spared.

And then came the moment when Madam Bones said, “Lily Potter. The choices are imprisonment in Tullianum—she has already been stripped of her magic, thanks to events that we all saw yesterday—or death. Madam Marchbanks.”

Harry looked into the face of the old witch, who was friends with the southern goblins, and had helped him free them and secure the London tunnels when he thought Voldemort’s attack might fall there. She looked fierce.

“Death,” she said.

Harry closed his eyes.

The next witch voted for life in Tullianum, and then the world altered and became unreal in Harry’s consciousness. He couldn’t feel his own breathing, but he could feel Draco’s. He could hear the voices calling out their votes, but he shouldn’t have been able to hear them at all, since his own heartbeat was so loud.

He counted. He had two lists, a ledger in his mind, and for each vote, a quill inked down a word on either side.

Ten for death, eight for Tullianum…
And then another for death, and two more for Tullianum, and what did that make?

“Tullianum,” said another voice, and Harry panicked. He’d lost the count.

He could feel his breath speeding up, to the point of a panic attack. He felt Draco exclaim something softly, and then a vial was jostling at his lips, the sweet smell of a Calming Draught filling his nostrils. Harry gulped it, and then struggled against the serenity that spread over his thoughts. He had to think, damn it!

The doom went on spreading, voice by voice down the circle, and Harry did not know what was to happen, and he hung suspended over a knife’s edge. Everything hurt—his eyes, as if he’d spent a month weeping; his throat, as though it were closing in on itself; his skin, as though it could hardly bear to have Draco’s arms wrapped so tightly around him. The Calming Draught forced his muscles to relax against their will, and his mind not to speed so fast, but nothing could stop the Wizengamot members from speaking.

And then Madam Bones said, “Minister Scrimgeour.”

Scrimgeour. Who hated his parents. Who hated abusers. Who had promised James that he would look over the charges again, and try to see if he couldn’t get him charged with something more violent than neglect.

Harry found his eyes open without a notion of how he’d opened them. He was looking straight at Scrimgeour, who was looking straight back at him. Somehow, that did not surprise Harry.

Scrimgeour looked into his eyes for a moment that could not have been longer than a moment, because Madam Bones didn’t get impatient and ask for his vote again. His eyes were yellow, one indication of Light pureblood heritage, and merciless and fathomless as an eagle’s. Then he leaned nearer to Madam Bones, and he spoke. Harry saw his lips form the word as if in a dream.

“Tullianum,” he said.

Madam Bones nodded, looking slightly dazed. “Lily Potter goes to Tullianum for life.”

Harry felt himself sag back; the words had stolen all his own power to keep himself upright. He felt Draco’s arms come around him, and pull him in tight, and he knew he was crying again. He had the urge to raise his hand and wipe at the tears. Merlin, he was so sick of crying.

But he couldn’t, he truly couldn’t this time. The moment was past, and he might have helped to save her life, and he was free, the last tie severed.

******

James tried not to fight when the Aurors stepped back into the courtroom. It would be all right, he told himself. There was still time for Harry—just Harry now, but the renunciation of a name didn’t mean the renunciation of a family—to come leaping over the balcony railing and save him.

And then an Auror was undoing the shackles, and another pulling him to his feet, and James realized, realized, that he would not be saved this time, that there was no magical cure, no sudden reversal of fortune, to spare him the loss of his magic.

“No!” he screamed, and his magic rose, wandless, and lashed at the Aurors. They’d expected that, though, and one of them cast up a shield to defend his partner. That partner stepped up a moment later, James’s brief fury done with, to clasp a collar around his neck with a murmured incantation. James knew the collars and the spell, both, from his time in the Aurors. It would bind his magic to his body permanently. It was only used as a prelude to a criminal’s being led off to lose his magic entirely.

Truth struck him and exploded his mind.

“No!” he screamed again, and he might have fallen to the floor, and he might have struck someone, or kicked someone, but he didn’t know, he didn’t think, he couldn’t think, his mind swimming in uttermost despair, inevitability—

Until the moment the Aurors brought him into the room with the artifact that would strip him of his magic, and there was no escape.

******
Lucius narrowed his eyes and gave a small shrug. It was not the outcome he had expected—nor, indeed, the outcome he had desired, since it now meant his spell on Lily Potter, the one that would insure she felt the few seconds of her death as a year of torture and pain, would not be allowed to come into play. But then, perhaps he should not have expected anything else, when they had a vates in the courtroom.

A vates who had just renounced his last name, apparently.

Would he like another one? Lucius thought, amused, but he knew better than to ask the question now. He rose and held out his arm to his wife, who accepted it with grace. Her red gown rustled around her.

“Pleasant not to have to declare blood-feud on anyone for a wrong verdict, isn’t it, my dear?” he murmured, as he guided her towards the doors.

Narcissa tilted back so that her head rested on his shoulder, her eyes bright with half a dozen emotions Lucius did not often see there. But her answer was purely herself. “Of course it is. You know that the Wizengamot only made the decision that it did because of me, I hope, and their fear of being on the wrong end of my wand.”

Lucius laughed aloud, a sound that caused most of the people in the nearby galleries to turn around and stare at him. He did not care. Those people were not married to his wife.

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Indigena Yaxley rose slowly to her feet, her eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

Well. The Dark Lord wanted me to see this and report anything interesting to him. I shall have more than merely interesting things to report.

She worked her way down the stairs, pausing patiently when others forced themselves past her. She wasn’t in a hurry to go anywhere. And the constant pauses allowed her to gaze her fill on—Harry? Lord Harry? She was not sure what to call him, even in her head.

He had spoken as his own soul required him to. Indigena did not doubt it for a moment. She had caught a glimpse of that soul through his words, and she knew what she would be facing.

She would never change her allegiance. Her nephew had done that, hiding from what the Dark Mark on his arm meant, and had required her to answer his debt of honor by adopting the allegiance herself. A true Yaxley did not waver, did not turn, never forsook honor and never forsook pride.

But she did regret that it could not have been different, that she could not walk up to—Harry now, and offer him a simple oath. He was a leader that she would be proud to have served, someone for whom she would willingly have left her greenhouses and her gardens.

I regret it, my lord. Indeed, I do. And I look forward to meeting you on the battlefield. That we may share the bond of honorable enemies is something to hope for.

It was a regret. She was still allowed those.

******

Lily was sure there was some mistake, when she was escorted from the holding cell they had given her down into one of a row of little rooms, all the same, all carved out of the rock. She had a bed, and a small loo, and a table where food would appear three times a day. There was nothing else, but there did not need to be. Harry could not have meant what he said, or the world would already be shaking in fear of a second Voldemort. It was a feint, to fool the Wizengamot. He would be along any moment, to free her and run away into the darkness with her, to go back to Godric’s Hollow and renew his training.

Lily did not see a reason to fear, when the enchanted lights in her room went off and Harry had not come. Of course he would come at night. The darkness should be literal, the better to hide them.

Lily did not lose hope, when she woke and Harry was not there yet. All the cells in Tullianum looked alike. He would need to search for her, past steel doors and carved gray walls, all the same.
Lily felt a faint tremor of disquiet, when she had sat on her bed in silence for hours—there was nothing to do in the cell—and still Harry did not appear. But, of course, he would need to wait until no one suspected he might move. The ones who claimed to love him, but had not molded him like she had, would be watching him too closely right now. He would come when he could.

Lily had to bite her lip to keep from crying, when the lights went out again and she was reminded that Harry’s magic was powerful enough to have let him do anything he wanted about the people, the doors, the bars, the walls, holding him back from her.

Lily woke in the darkness that second night, and began to understand.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Forty-Six: Our Echoes Roll From Soul to Soul

Augustus Starrise was on his feet and moving the moment the sentence was announced, and the elder Potters taken away. He knew that Potter’s—no, Harry’s, he was Harry, now, and his brother Potter—friends would try to get him away as soon as possible. He had to speak to the boy before then, since visiting Hogwarts would be far too public for the kind of private alliance offer he wanted to make.

The staff he held abruptly brightened, the band of gold on the top, the one that held a bit of Alba’s magic, shining as if struck by the sun. Augustus turned his head, sighting along the top of the staff. His heart beat in a mouth that seemed all bone, without a drop of moisture. Was one of Alba’s murderers here? Had her magic recognized one of her killers? For that, he would abandon the alliance offer he was about to make Potter, since, if he could find the killers, nothing would matter after that, not once he called the Caerimonia Inrevocabilis, the sternest of the justices rituals.

But the gleam faded, and Augustus shook his head. He had never entirely understood the twining of his twin sister’s magic with his own; her death so soon after the creation of the band of gold had ruined the enchantments that would have enabled him to summon her after death, speak with her, and learn whom he should take vengeance upon. The staff might have reacted to nothing more than the Dark Mark on the arm of someone in the room.

The Malfoy heir was helping Harry out of his seat when Augustus focused again. He took several small, smooth steps forward, calling on the pureblood dances that let him project an air of majesty out beyond his own features. People moved out of the way without knowing quite why they did so, and Augustus found himself standing comfortably in front of Harry, who glanced up at him and blinked.

“Mr. Starrise,” said Harry, his voice devoid of emotion. Even with the tear tracks on his face, he still looked impressive, Augustus had to admit. Shutters had come down inside his eyes, hiding all the possible emotional wounds behind a mask of strength, and he was tensed, as if he prepared to run or leap. His magic sang around him, a low-voiced sob of sweet music. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Augustus inclined his head. “I have never seen such a display of compassion and mercy,” he said quietly, letting the truth come spilling out of his lips. It really was what he had felt when witnessing the boys’ performance on behalf of his parents, imbeciles who had never loved him and had treated a child that any pureblood wizarding family would have been proud to bear poorly. “You are enough of the Light to make me honor you, Harry. May I become your ally?” He held out his hand, and waited patiently to see if the boy would accept it or not.

Harry stared searchingly into his eyes instead of accepting or rejecting the offer right away. Augustus nodded. This was a worthy person to follow, quite apart from his other allies possibly opening the way to Alba’s killers. At his lowest, his most broken, he could still evaluate the political world that never stopped turning for personal causes, and ask intelligent questions.

“Why do you want to?” he asked. “It is true that I honor some ideals of the Light, Mr. Starrise, but you should know that I also practice Dark magic, and have Dark allies.” The Malfoy heir’s arm tightened around his waist, and he snorted, as though he could claim the highest place in the ranks of those allies. Augustus studied the boy, and was able to dismiss him in a moment. Someday, Draco Malfoy would be impressive, but that day was not yet come. “I thought you were too purely of the Light to ever want to fight beside me.”

“I have changed my mind,” said Augustus. “The year away from politics that the Minister forced on me gave me time to think, and You-Know-Who’s rising this summer completed the change.”

Harry inclined his head. “And you would be faithful, and not object to working beside Dark wizards, then?” he asked.
A fair question, Augustus had to admit. “I would not be willing to use Dark Arts myself, but other than that, yes, I would follow you faithfully,” he said. “And you gain more than just the Starrises with my hand, Mr. Pot—Harry. Where the Starrises go, the Griffinsnest family will follow, and at the very least, the minor Light families, like Owlborn and Morningsgift, will consider following. We have long been considered the most prominent of the northern Light wizarding families.”

He wondered why Harry’s face went still when he said the word “northern,” but it seemed no more foreboding than the still eyes. Harry nodded when a moment had passed. “Very well,” he said.

“How!” the Malfoy heir exclaimed. “You can’t seriously mean that! He would have testified against you at Fudge’s trial last year!”

“And he didn’t,” Harry pointed out, ignoring, with what Augustus thought was good tact, the fact that the ritual Scrimgeour had invoked against him hadn’t let him do anything vaguely political at the time. “And now he’s here, and he says he’s changed his mind. I should let him do that, Draco, at the least.”

The Malfoy heir grumbled low in his throat and gave Augustus a nasty look. Augustus smiled back at him. The threats of puffed-up little Dark wizards were not something he took very seriously.

He shook Harry’s hand, feeling content as that outpouring of magic surged around him. He had meant what he said. He knew something of grief, and the way that Harry had been able to ride and master his own had struck him like a lightning bolt.

He also knew, from that display, that there was no way Harry would ever join him in his vengeance against Alba’s murderers, or allow him to take it if he knew what Augustus was searching for. That was all right. Augustus fully intended to serve this young vates, who might be the only successful vates in history, to the best of his ability for as long as he could, and then part ways when he had to take his own justice without damaging Harry more than the loss of a murderous ally would.

******

Connor wrinkled his nose and rubbed a hand over his hair. He had thought he would feel complete satisfaction at seeing his parents sentenced, but a few minutes after they’d led James out of the courtroom, he had started feeling—weird.

Yes, weird was a good word for it. And so was “strange,” and so was “itchy.”

He scratched at his scar for a moment, and wondered if a minion of Voldemort was in the courtroom. But why would one of them come here? What could possibly be interesting about this? They could read all about the outcome of the trial in the papers. There had been loads of reporters present. Besides, Connor really, really doubted the Dark Lord who wanted to conquer Britain was interested in what one coward and one idiot had been doing to their children during their spare time.

Then he remembered that he’d told everyone that his brother was the real Boy-Who-Lived.

All right, maybe Voldemort would be interested.

But none of that explained why his hair itched, or the back of his head, or the inside of his elbow. Connor was getting tired of scratching all of them, and he was starting to think that someone would think he had fleas. He was already getting a few odd looks from people passing him by in their rush to get out of the galleries.

Then the people stopped passing him, and someone gasped. Connor didn’t know why until Harry said, “Connor?”

He looked up, and did his best to smile. It was difficult. Harry—hadn’t been familiar for a while. He hadn’t looked anything like as fragile as he’d been yesterday. He’d gone down into the courtroom and spoken for their parents the way a phoenix would sing. Connor felt awe, and a little of the wonder he used to feel around Dumbledore, and worry, too. He would have liked to know how Harry had managed that, and at what cost to himself.

“How,” he said, and then they both asked, at the same time, “Are you all right?”

Harry smiled. Connor was glad to see the expression. “I’m fine,” Harry said. Draco snorted his own impression of that at Harry’s shoulder, but Connor had learned to look at his brother when it came to questions like this, and, incredibly, it did seem as though he might really be fine—his eyes were wide, but not dark, and he seemed drained, but not worn to a thread. “But what about you? I saw you scratching.”
“I itch,” Connor admitted. “I don’t know why. If I find out the twins put itching powder on me, I’ll—” A small explosion of white light came off the back of his hair, and he cursed softly and tried to cover it with a hand.

Harry’s expression altered. “Oh, Connor,” he whispered. “Close your eyes for a minute, and then tell me what you see.”

*How can I see anything with my eyes closed?* But Connor obediently closed his eyes, and concentrated. He started when a vision of a corridor appeared, lined with portraits high enough above his head that he couldn’t quite make them out, and paneled with rich white wood.

“A hallway?” he asked as much as stated. “And portraits, and white wood.”

“I thought so,” Harry whispered. “I should have thought of it before. You just became heir to Lux Aeterna, Connor. They stripped James’s magic from him—Connor felt a fierce, brief stab of triumph that Harry wasn’t calling James their father anymore—and I renounced the Potter name, so the linchpin is linked to you now. Probably other Potter properties, too.”

Connor nodded. He could feel more itches if he thought about them, just waiting to explode into visions when he looked. But, right now, he was more concerned with something else. Houses would be there when he went and looked for them. The chance to have a conversation with Harry wouldn’t always be.

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Harry shook his head. “Not right away,” he said. “Not for a long time, in fact. I—” He hesitated, as though he wanted to find the right words, and then spoke carefully. “I never felt as though I belonged with anyone the way I belonged with James and Lily and you, or the way I should have belonged there. And until I can actually experience that sense of rightness somewhere else, I don’t want a surname, or parents.” He smiled, and Connor flinched. It was a smile that expressed all the sadness Harry had so far succeeded in keeping off his face. “Besides, I’ve had a lot of practice being a brother, so that’s all right, but not much practice being a son. I don’t think I’d be any good at it.”

“Merlin, Harry, you’d be perfect for plenty of people,” said Draco, apparently unable to keep his mouth shut any longer. Of course, for a Malfoy, silence is unnatural, Connor thought. “You don’t know how welcome my parents would make you. And you know what Regulus is offering, and I’m sure Mrs. Bulstrode—Millicent’s mother, I mean—would love to make you her son, and you know Professor Snape—”

“Don’t, Draco,” said Harry, all but snapping the words, and Draco hushed. Connor hid his smirk. At least I don’t have to worry about Draco walking all over him anymore. “I’m not ready to think about it, I said.” He turned back to Connor, his eyes steady and soft again. “What about you? Are you going to be all right now that Lily and James are in prison?”

Connor nodded. “I talked with the Weasleys when I was with them this summer. Mr. Weasley said I was perfectly welcome to stay with them as long as I liked, and they’d apply for legal guardianship when I wanted them to.” He didn’t quite want them to, not yet. Lily and James deserved prison, of course they did, and Connor didn’t need someone to come rushing up to him and hug him just because they were in Tullianum now. He wasn’t a little boy.

Harry seemed to disagree, since he leaned forward and hugged Connor in the next moment. Connor blinked and bowed his head to his brother’s shoulder, then hugged back. “I’m glad,” Harry whispered into Connor’s ear. “I know you would make as good a brother to Ron as you have been to me.”

Connor remembered the first three years they’d been at Hogwarts, and bit his lip. But he wound up nodding. It seemed that Harry had forgiven him for those years, if he’d ever held them against him in the first place. “Thanks, Harry.”

And then Draco was drawing Harry gently away, and Connor had to follow them or find Remus, since he had to get back to Hogwarts somehow, but he spent a moment gripping the balcony railing in his hands and staring at the floor of the courtroom.

It seems so strange that it might actually be over.

But the itching in his head said it was. Connor hesitated, then closed his eyes and gave in to the visions of Lux Aeterna again. He had to admit, he was curious about what was behind some of the doors locked with wards that James had never allowed them to open…

******

Rufus leaned back in his seat, now and then nodding to show that he was paying some attention to the pauses in Amelia’s nervous chatter, and followed Harry with his eyes.

Remarkable, really, how much of the room turns around him.

Some of that, of course, came from the reporters and others who just wanted to see the trial as a spectacle. They would peer at Harry as if he were the main actor in a play. Rufus felt even more viciously satisfied with Harry’s speech than he might have, on account of them. They had come expecting to see a tragedy, and Harry had brought a touch of the sacred into the room and made them confront it. A few hadn’t been able to, and had taken to their heels, feigning boredom with yawns.

Their too-wide eyes gave them away, though. Rufus would be extremely surprised if many of their accounts of the end of the trial, either appearing in the papers or passed by word-of-mouth, were coherent.

Others turned around Harry as if they were planets and he the sun—or perhaps moons and the sun would be a better analogy, Rufus thought, since they were hoping to catch and shine with some of his reflected glory. “Power” traveled in hushed whispers throughout the courtroom, and there were a few too many people obviously not leaving until Harry did. Many people had heard of the young Lord-level wizard; few had ever been in the presence of his magic. Rufus was glad that he had been, before, and so had most of the members of the Wizengamot. That irresistible feeling of wanting to get closer to the source and soak up the magic, bask in it, had not influenced their decision in the sentencing of the Potter parents.

Well. Much.
There were Harry’s allies, too, watching him openly, though some had already departed, as if secure that the boy was in good hands. There were more of them than Rufus had expected, and he saw another alliance made as Augustus actually went to Harry, and Harry, after a few moments of discussion, accepted his hand. Rufus shook his head. *I do not think that particular set will survive, but we will see.*

The world always altered when another Lord or Lady appeared. So far, though, Rufus had mostly seen only interruptions in the dance. Now people were starting to find partners, and fall into new patterns.

*And pick up speed.* The next few weeks would be dangerous, Rufus knew. That was to be expected. News of Dumbledore’s spell was spreading. There was Digle to question. There were the revelations that had burst like dying stars in the trial, that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived and had renounced his name. Their world was changing. Everyone who was wise and cared about his or her own position would be lifting up a head, pricking cautious ears.

Rufus could feel himself smiling, despite all the evidence that he still had changes to make in the Ministry he had thought was getting cleaner, despite the fact that half-controlled chaos in the wizarding world would make his own task harder, particularly now that Dark wizards, who’d withdrawn from the Ministry under Cornelius’s paranoia, would be trying to influence his people through bribery and favors.

*Good to be challenged. Let’s me know I’m alive.*

And it seemed that Harry was a Lord-level partner who might actually be trusted to keep his word and not muck about in the Ministry. No doubt they would clash, but Harry would not actually seek to win because of his magic.

Rufus had not thought he would live to see this day two years ago, had not thought such a day was possible. But it was, and here it was.

That was one reason he had voted for Lily Potter’s life, he thought as he stood, and apparently stunned Harry to the core. Of course, he had accepted most of Harry’s speech, and he had been an Auror who, while he hated abusers, also hated losing someone he’d arrested to death—it was too simple—and he had to admit a certain longing to see Lily Potter’s face if and when she learned what her son really was, what he was really doing.

But he had also wanted to show Harry that he had that trust in him, that he believed in many of the same principles and could walk beside Harry on the path he trod.

*Walk beside. Never follow. That is where, and how, we will clash, when it comes. He’s a leader, but so am I.*

But Rufus felt an eagerness for that challenge, now. It was no longer a storm to be feared, the wind that had begun blowing today, but a cleansing gale that might yet sweep most of the foulness left in their world away.

******

Snape shielded Harry from prying eyes and questions as he guided him and Draco out of the Ministry. Regulus, and Pettigrew, and even Lupin, shepherding the Potter boy, soon joined them.

The *only* Potter boy, now.

Snape allowed himself a moment to revel in that, and dismissed it. He couldn’t actually enjoy Harry’s renunciation of his family as much as he might have, say, a year ago, because he had felt too deep a longing the moment he heard of it—a longing to be able to fill that place in Harry’s life himself.

He had known what he was giving up, what sacrifice he was making, when he revealed Harry’s abuse. He told himself that for the thousandth time. He had known it would cost him the trust Harry had in him. But it had also led to this moment, this freedom, and apparently Harry’s conscious choice to shut the lid on the past and continue with his life. Snape could not regret that.

But he had always been greedy, selfish, wanting more than he should want. He had seen that in himself when he brewed the potion out of Melissa Prince’s book, the one that let him see his own soul. He could summon the vision if he closed his eyes, a dark flawed crystal—the ambitious impatience that had put him into Slytherin, and led him into the Death Eaters.

He wanted to be a part of Harry’s life again. He wanted to see Harry take his surname, and call him by something other than a title, which Harry had never done. He wished he had at least the level of comfort with Harry that Lupin had.
It would not come without hard work; he knew that. When had anything he wanted in his life come without struggle that would kill half the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs in the world?

He wanted it now anyway.

He had been hovering behind Harry as he spoke to his brother, enough to hear Harry say that he wanted a rightness, a sense of belonging, before he took another surname. Snape was sure that he could give him that—more than sure. It would take time, but he could outwait the time, and do whatever was needed to show Harry that he would have a home if he wanted it, in the Slytherin dungeons or at Spinner’s End, for the rest of his days.

But Snape did not believe that was the only reason Harry was currently refusing to take a surname. He was used to hearing a heavy tone in his ward’s voice when he held something back, and he had heard it when Harry spoke to Potter about family.

*What was it?*

That question had to wait until they had arrived back at Hogwarts, and had an interview with the Headmistress in which Harry said very little, and then Lupin and Potter had cleared off. Regulus lingered, Pettigrew at his side, looking expressively at Harry. And Draco, of course, was there, too, but Snape did not mind that. Draco could hear every question he asked Harry, and would not breathe a word of it to anyone else.

Harry kept his head bowed, refusing to meet Regulus’s eyes. Snape watched his old friend’s face, and saw the moment when Regulus decided to throw caution to the winds and just ask. He sighed, but kept the sigh internal. *Given what they both are like, this has to happen.*

“So, Harry,” said Regulus, a little too casually, “now that there’s no longer two people who don’t deserve you hanging around in the background—”

“No,” said Harry, and jerked his head up, the motion violent. “I can’t. Not yet, maybe not ever. Don’t push me, Regulus,” he added, when Regulus opened his mouth. “I can’t do this. I—want to see you, talk to you again, this weekend, but I don’t want to talk about inheritance or family or bloodlines. Please.”

Regulus, like Snape, could apparently hear the wavering in Harry’s voice on that last word. Ordinarily, Harry would have already withdrawn to lick his wounds and grieve in private. That he had not was a vast step forward, Snape knew, but now he had reached the limit of his tolerance.

Now, Regulus nodded, and said softly, “Of course, Harry. I’ll be happy to come visit you on Saturday, Sunday, whenever you want to see me.” He abruptly dropped to one knee and hugged Harry hard, surprising a squeak out of him. “Whatever you need, Harry. I want to be there for you.”

Snape saw Harry freeze in shock, and narrowed his eyes. *Yes, there is still something wrong, something unexpressed.*

But the shock was gone in the next moment, and Harry returned the embrace. “Thank you,” he murmured. He glanced at Pettigrew. “And you, too, Peter.”

Pettigrew was wiser than Regulus, in some ways; he simply hugged Harry, nodded once, and turned away, wishing him a soft good-night. Then the two men left together. Snape guessed that they’d stay at Cobley-by-the-Sea, always Regulus’s refuge when he’d suffered a severe disappointment.

That left the three of them, and Harry looked at both Draco and Snape as if he’d like nothing so much as to slip away. Snape could not allow it, not yet. He wanted to know what the thing gnawing at Harry was.

Harry turned his head away when Snape tried to meet his eyes. Snape realized with a little jolt that the boy was apparently afraid he’d use Legilimency on him.

*This is not good. I must show him he can trust me. Does that mean that I should not ask him what is troubling him?* Snape pondered that, but, in the end, felt he had to. *I don’t think Draco realizes there’s more to this, not when he’s caught up in his own hurt feelings about Harry rejecting the Malfoys as an immediate family.* Draco had looked extremely disgruntled the whole time Harry spoke with his brother, but never more so than at the words about family. *I want Harry healthy. I need to speak with him.*

“Heard,” he said quietly. Harry turned back towards him, but didn’t raise his eyes. “Something more is behind your reluctance to take a surname than a sense of rightness or belonging, important as that is. What is it?”
Harry almost slumped against the wall. “I wish you didn’t know me so well, sir,” he whispered.

Snape tucked the pain those words gave him away in an Occlumency pool. Draco started and glanced between them, then reached out towards Harry. Harry leant towards him, trembling, and Snape realized that he was probably pushed over his limits already, and dropping fast.

Snape winced, but reminded himself that, if he didn’t do this now, then Harry might tuck the pain away and simply refuse to be questioned on it again. “Will you tell Draco, if you will not tell me?” he asked quietly. “I will leave, if you wish me to.”

Harry brought up his head with a gasp, as if he were drowning. He looked from one face to another, then said, in a mutter, “If I can’t tell you, whom can I tell?” He waited one moment more, as though for an invisible signal, then nodded and began.

“What I said about family was true. And I know that I hate Lily and James now as well as love them, and I understand that other people love me. You two, for example, and Connor, and Regulus, and Peter.” He took a deep breath, and Snape could almost feel him shoving through a barrier that prevented him from saying the next words. Knowing how thick Harry’s resistance to talking had been in the weeks leading up to the trial, he was silently impressed.

“I know why I love you,” said Harry quietly. “I’m inside my head, after all. I know my own emotions. And I know that you love me. I said that. I acknowledge it. But I don’t know why some of you love me, not completely. I don’t really understand why Regulus wants to make me the Black heir, instead of someone related to him by blood, or instead of his own child, if he ever gets married. I don’t understand why some other person would want to adopt me into a family—me, that is, and not any powerful Lord-level wizard, or the Boy-Who-Lived. I don’t understand the level of love that Draco claims the Bulstrodes have for me, or his own parents, or—.” He clenched his hand. “Or you, sir, on that level.” He nodded at Snape. “I trust that you care for me, because you’ve demonstrated it. But I don’t understand why you care for me as a father, if you do, and not just a guardian. I’m not good at being a son. I don’t think I can do this.” His voice sank, nerveless, and then dropped away entirely.

Draco made a small, fierce noise, but didn’t say anything. Snape found that he could not speak, either, but stared into Harry’s eyes. Harry had lifted his head and stared back at him with emotions he needed no Legilimency to read. They were terror and incomprehension, honest and open and complete.

“Harry,” he whispered, ready, at that moment, to try and explain the terms of his love, use words that would make him sound soppy, reveal his own secrets, anything that would calm the shaking boy in front of him.

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes. “I’ll understand someday,” he whispered. “I’ll work on understanding it. But not just yet. I— I wish I could take this weekend and just calm down, come down from the trial. But I don’t think I can. I have letters to write, and there’ll be a circus to deal with when the papers start reporting all the outcomes of the trial.”

Draco reached for him, but Harry slipped sideways. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve just taken all I can for right now.” Gently, he reached out, caressed Draco’s right cheek, and then turned and slid off down the hallway.

Snape thought about pursuing him, but was confident that Harry would do himself no harm. He was probably going to a place he could be alone, and recover in the best way he still knew how to heal himself. Silently, though, he promised himself that Harry would indeed have the weekend.

If there was only some way that I could insure that he takes it.

But then, as long as I’m wishing for the impossible... if only there was some way to show him how very much we all love him, and that he isn’t a bad son. He simply never got the chance to try.

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Harry stood on top of the Astronomy Tower, blinking as rain sluiced down over him. It had started raining shortly after they left the Ministry, but he hadn’t thought the storm would chase them back to Scotland. Apparently, he’d been wrong.

He bowed his head and put his head in his arms, welcoming the touch of the cold water. At least it would explain his shivering if someone came up and saw him.

He was still feeling the aftereffects of the intense fear he’d experienced in front of Draco and Snape—the fear of revealing a vulnerability like that; the fear that they wouldn’t understand him; the fear that, no, he didn’t know how to be a son, how to relate to a parent, and that he never would.
He was trying. He believed them when they said someone else could adopt him. He was talking. He just didn’t know why the chance for another family existed yet. It was like understanding that magic existed, but not having the slightest idea how to grasp and use it. He’d have to understand it from the inside before he could trust himself not to mess things up.

Apart from anything else, understanding why other people loved him would make him change his vision of himself even further than the Room of Requirement had. He could feel the first dawning of the revelation. It was as terrifying as it was exhilarating, and to deal with it in the presence of other people—particularly people who’d just realized how much he didn’t understand—wasn’t something he was up to yet.

Harry took a deep breath and wiped the hair back from his forehead. He was all right, he reassured himself. A good night’s sleep would restore his balance wonderfully. Then he could continue with his course in the raging political world he’d finally realized didn’t stop turning just because he had a bad few days. There were alliances to be made, as Augustus Starrise had proven to him, and other people affected by the trial to be cared for, as Connor had shown him. Harry wished he could collapse for the weekend, but he didn’t see how it was possible.

Someone moved beside him. Harry turned his head, ready to tell the person to go away, if it was anyone other than one of the Slytherins, and to tell one of them that he’d come down to bed any minute now.

It was none of them. It was a woman he hadn’t seen for more than a year, a calm, small, wren-like woman with brown hair and brown eyes. Harry stared at her, and felt her eyes see into his soul in return. Well, of course. She was a Seer. This time, though, he thought he could feel the operation of her gift.

Then he shook his head, and found his tongue. “I just—I thought letters wouldn’t reach you for two weeks,” he said weakly.

“For owls from you, we have lifted the shadows around our Sanctuary,” said Vera softly. “And we have our own ways of traveling fast when we must, isolated though we are. We have waited for a summons like this, Harry.” She cocked her head at him. “And you may, of course, take a few days to rest. If you wish, I will talk to anyone who objects.”

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed. “I think you’re talking to the only person who will,” he said as lightly as he could.

“And do you have any more objections?”

Harry hesitated one moment. He supposed he didn’t have to answer the latest letters from the Burkes and the Belvilles immediately. And there were not, as far as he knew, any battles to be planned for or attacks to be defended against in the next two days. And he was not the only possible source of comfort in the world. Connor had Remus, after all.

Can I do this? Do I really deserve it?

What if I assumed the answer was yes, and went from there?

“No,” he whispered. “I think I’ll do this.”

“Good,” said Vera, her voice radiant. “That is very good, Harry.” Her footsteps moved towards him, and he opened his eyes to see her smiling down at him, one palm extended. “Shall we get out of the rain?”

Harry nodded, and, reaching up, clasped her hand.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_

**Intermission: The Light and the Light Lord**

It was like nothing he had experienced before.

One moment he stood, as always, in Still-Beetle confinement, unable to tell, from the faint connection that he still felt with Kingsley’s mind, if his assassination attempt had succeeded as yet. There was not either the despair that Albus would have expected if Kingsley had failed completely, nor the wild triumph that would have signaled an assassination safely carried out. Nor had Kingsley died yet, as he should have under the wands of enraged Aurors, or at Harry’s hands. Albus could not tell what was happening, and it puzzled him completely.

The next moment, a gryphon was in the room with him.
Albus eyed the creature cautiously. He was sure it could not be real—such an animal could not have flown throughout the Ministry without triggering half a hundred wards—but he was equally sure that someone powerful enough to project this illusion through all the spells that surrounded him was an enemy he should have heard of before now.

This was not Tom’s illusion, he was almost sure of it. Tom would settle for a more direct approach.

The gryphon was made of some delicate substance, now white in color, now gold. It raised its eagle-head and stared around the small cell, deep in Tullianum, to which they had sent Albus with another Portkey. Its eyes were yellow, unforgiving, cold.

Albus let out a slow breath. Perhaps he had the identity of the gryphon’s creator wrong. Perhaps his old friend had made it and sent it to rescue him. Certainly, the creature didn’t seem to approve of the conditions in which the Ministry had chosen to keep Albus.

Then the yellow eyes turned on him, and he knew it was not so. The gryphon came from a foe. Its wings snapped up as it looked at him, and a low, long hiss, more suited to a serpent than either an eagle or a lion, came forth from its beak.

Albus felt his magic surge beneath the bounds of the Still-Beetle confinement. So far, he had not managed to break his imprisonment, and he had not really tried, since he wanted, if he managed to recover his reputation, to show the wizarding world that he had obeyed the due process of law and gone tamely to his fate. Yet he knew it was not impossible for him to step free of this; Harry had done it last Christmas when Lily confronted him. If need be, if he could summon the rage, then perhaps he could break free of his bonds and defend himself from the gryphon.

Yet wasn’t it Harry’s Dark magic that had shattered the Still-Beetle’s hold? Albus was sure that he did not want to practice Dark Arts.

He hesitated, and into that hesitation, the gryphon spoke.

“Albus Dumbledore,” it said, the hissing forming into words as the voices of snakes must when Harry or Tom spoke to them.

“Did you ever think what you were doing, when you took the title of Light Lord upon yourself?”

Albus only regarded the gryphon calmly. This was a trick, he was certain now. Perhaps the Minister had learned something of his involvement with Kingsley. That was one possibility, that Kingsley had neither succeeded nor failed, but been captured and stopped. Well, Albus would wait until they ceased to suspect him—they would think it was only the lingering effects of the widespread compulsion that had driven him to this, not a second spell—and then sent him off again. Sooner or later, he would force Harry into a murder done with Dark Arts. He knew that Harry would turn to that, if Kingsley killed or sufficiently threatened someone he loved. And if Harry killed someone who was not a Death Eater, and not in the heat of battle, then public opinion would begin to swing against him. Albus would stand a much better chance of emerging unscathed from his own trial, particularly if Homer could bring Hestia to him again, or sneak in himself, and he could use a different sort of compulsion.

With the old compulsion itself gone, though, he would need a black reputation for Harry to build the new spell upon, to convince the Light magic that he was fighting a deeply Dark opponent. And Kingsley would achieve that for him sooner or later.

The gryphon hissed again. Albus waited for it to go away. Surely a wizard of enough power to send it here would realize that it was not having the effect he wanted. He would withdraw it in disgust. Albus was not sure why he had sent it in the first place.

“You have not thought,” said the gryphon. “I will tell you. I have watched you for a long time, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. I sensed the power in you, and I waited, and hoped. You declared yourself a Light Lord after you turned from the vates path, and you promised that you would do good among the people of the wizarding world. You were a compeller, but you promised to do good, and promises can counteract the darkest of inborn intentions. Free will is the most wonderful of gifts, and I trusted you to use your compulsion in the defense of the free will of others.

“You battled the Dark Lord Grindelwald, and so emerged fully into your power. The magic on which you drew was contented. The song of the sun and the moon and the stars in their spheres was not unknown to you. You heard it in your dreams. You might have gone on growing, to become one with the Light in a way that no one has managed since Calypso McGonagall.

“Alas, that you did not do so.” The gryphon’s voice descended into a whisper. “Alas, that you have become what you are now.”

Albus was now sure that this must be a sending of Tom’s, or Harry’s; they were the only other wizards in Britain now, besides his mentor, powerful enough to have heard the song of the spheres in their dreams, and his mentor would never do something like this to him. He waited for it to be done. Of course, in the Still-Beetle confinement, he could do little else, but he could and did
refuse to let the words make an impact on his brain. No illusion would make him doubt his choices. They remained as they had always been—regrettable, some of them, but inevitable.

“You changed,” said the gryphon. “You began to make sacrifices. That would not have sufficed to change your good intentions to twisted ones, if they had been sacrifices that you made yourself. But you asked them of others. You bent their wills with tactics that any Light Lord should have scorned. A true Lord of Light has no need of compulsion to enforce his will, nor deceptions and subterfuge and glamour to make others believe that which is not true.”

Albus was sure now that this apparition had come from Harry. The words about free will proclaimed it—they were not words that Tom would have used—and so did the thick disdain for his use of compulsion. He felt a surge of sadness.

Harry, this is why I must be free, and why you must surrender to my will or be slain. I still wish you alive, and that is why I have refrained as long as I have. I am almost glad that Kingsley did not assassinate you, now. But if you continue to trouble me, I shall have no choice. We will find someone else to take your place in the prophecy. There are those who love your brother, or can be persuaded to.

“And even now you doubt me,” said the gryphon. “Even now you think this is a falsehood. You have fallen so far into yourself that you have lost the ability to distinguish between truth and lies. Only a short time ago, you were desperate. Do you remember that? You were convinced that you needed to destroy the vates. And now, you think that you are glad that you did not succeed, because you believe you can still control him. Your thoughts run and flow like water, molding themselves around you, so that you can think anything rather than think that you are wrong.”

A frisson of unease slid down Albus’s spine, hurting a bit, as his frozen muscles could not shiver. Then he told himself this was nonsense, because the creature must be guessing; Harry could not truly know what was in his head.

“I have come because I think now that there is no chance you will ever change,” said the gryphon. It moved forward, its feathers rippling like light on water. “I waited on opportunity after opportunity for redemption, and you have never taken any of them. The Dark does not care what its Lords do in its name. I care for mine. You have lost the right to call yourself a Light Lord. Even cornered, you do not admit the cornering. Even presented with proof of your wrong, you do not admit the wrong. And that is not what a Light Lord should do. A Light Lord must see.”

The gryphon loomed over him. Albus could no longer observe its eyes clearly. That was all right. This was magic, very strange magic, of course, but ultimately the product of a frustrated boy’s mind.

The gryphon bowed its head, clenched its beak on what seemed a corner of the air, and ripped his ability to practice Light magic away.

Albus felt the comfort, the center of his life, the warmth that beamed in the center of his chest and which he always reached for instead of Dark Arts, blaze and then fade. Frantically, he groped for it, a purely internal movement, like the race of his thoughts. He could still do magic, there was no doubt of that; his power was still there. But he found that he could not remember the incantations for Light spells. He could not remember the words that would have framed them, nor the will that would have driven them in the proper direction. He was like someone deaf for years, who could not remember what voices sounded like, though he knew that voices had once existed for him.

Nothing could have taken the ability to perform Light magic from him—

But the Light itself.

And there was the truth, after all. Confronted with his lost ability, Albus screamed silently, and stared at the gryphon, the manifestation of a magic he had ceased to hear in his dreams years ago, and had never more than half believed in for itself.

“It is done,” said the gryphon. “I cannot touch the Dark Arts; they are yours. But you are not a Light Lord any longer. I do not accept you. I turn my back on you.”

It faded, and Albus was left, spinning above a gulf of blankness, to confront his new reality.

On and on it went, long moments of reaching for certainties and having them fall out from under him, of clutching at cherished dreams and feeling them tatter. Then he found the one that did not unravel, and clung to it.

It was his love for his world, the world he had tried and striven so hard to protect, made so many sacrifices for, demanded so many sacrifices for. It could not tear, because all his being was bound up in it. Albus clung close and fast to it, and wished that he could close his eyes.
Our world is in more danger than ever before. I do not know if I can even command the spell on Kingsley any more, or the Order of the Phoenix, and I cannot call out to my mentor.

And then he paused, because he felt his magic still squirming in him, and there were all the Dark Arts incantations in his head, spells he had used before with only the greatest reluctance.

But needs must when a vates is in the world.

There were ways. Yes, there were ways. Albus felt his frantic heartbeat—which, under the Still-Beetle confinement, he was probably imagining—slowing. Hadn’t he thought this would happen someday? Hadn’t one of his dreams for years been that he lay in the mud of a battlefield, looking up at Tom, and heard the voice of their young savior behind him even as Tom incanted the Killing Curse? He had died content in those dreams, knowing that another was taking up the burden of saving their world, soothing it, settling it and protecting it from violent change.

Now he knew that neither Connor nor Harry was going to do that, at least not willingly, and he didn’t possess the ability to gently make them do it, either. Even if he passed his own trial unscathed, other would find out what he was now the moment he began using Dark magic.

But there was another who could take up the burden.

Albus had known his mentor did not want to be disturbed. He had walked long and far, into strange pathways, and had not claimed the Light Lord title that he could, by right, because of the seclusion he lived in. But he had bestirred himself to advise Albus about Harry several months ago, and if there were absolutely no other choice, then he would come forth, and take over Albus’s burden.

Albus needed a way of sending a message to him, though.

And since he had only Dark Arts now, and no way of knowing when Homer or Hestia might be able to come for him, it would take much more maneuvering than it would have before.

Carefully, wrapped in love and bounded by Dark, he began to plan.

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Chapter Forty-Seven: A Port in the Storm

Harry settled down with Vera in a small room on the sixth floor, furnished with thickly cushioned chairs—white, Harry wasn’t surprised to see, not after his glimpse of the Sanctuary in Peter’s mind last year—and with a fire blazing in a hearth larger than even the one in the hospital wing. Harry eyed the chairs cautiously. The wood appeared to have whorls of red in it. He didn’t think that kind of wood was ever used for chairs at Hogwarts.

He glanced at Vera, who simply smiled. “We bring a bit of the Sanctuary with us when we come to stay somewhere, Harry,” she said quietly. “And yes, I did clear this with your Headmistress. I could do nothing else, not when I hope to be by your side for a few months.”

A few months? Harry blinked. He hadn’t planned on that. He had planned on one of the Seers writing him, actually, with comfortably long gaps between the letters. He swallowed, and said, “I thought that Seers grew inundated with the sight of other souls, and had to retreat to the Sanctuary every once in a while?”

“And that is why I shall be here until my gift gets the better of me,” Vera said. “But it will be some time before that happens, and I have long wanted to help you, Harry.” Her face grew brilliant with an expression that wasn’t really a smile. “You do not know how pleased I was when you wrote to me, and with no sign that someone else was forcing you to set quill to parchment.”

Harry swallowed a few times. He could do this. Just because it was going to be harder than he’d expected was no reason to abandon it. And he had made the decision on his own. That was important. It was not like the decision to bring his parents to trial or face Voldemort, which, important as they had turned out to be, had their ultimate origin in other people’s choices. This was born of his confrontation with himself in the Room of Requirement. He had to take an active part in his own healing, or it was foredoomed to fail.

And how many horrible things had he faced and fought his way through before?
“Did someone force you to write to me, Harry?” Vera’s voice was still soft, but tight now with anger. “If someone did—"

Harry lifted his head and shook it. “No. I did that on my own. And I’m ready to face what you have to tell me.”

Vera nodded, the brilliant look appearing again. She leaned forward. Harry tensed instinctively, but she was too far away from him to cup his face, though it looked as if she would have liked to.

“You will not be surprised,” she murmured, “to learn that you don’t really regard yourself as human, not yet. That is one of the things you must learn.”

Harry huffed and crossed his arms. “I thought I had made more progress than that. I don’t think of myself as less important than other people any more.”

“Your first thoughts are still of them, Harry.”

“And is that a bad thing?” Harry frowned as he thought of the short-sighted selfishness that had prompted the Ravenclaws’ actions against him, that had prompted Connor’s behavior in first year, that had made James into the kind of man he was, along with cowardice. “So many people think of themselves first. I might be a bit less selfish than most, but—“

“You know that it can hurt you,” said Vera softly. “More, it can hurt others. What happens if you take a curse for someone else and die in battle, Harry? What will happen to those who follow you, honor you, love you?”

Harry could feel his frown growing more pronounced. They shouldn’t fight on one side of the war just because of a person. That’s like the Light families only fighting because Dumbledore led them, not because they think Voldemort’s an evil person or his ideals are wrong. I’ll have to show them that the ideals I represent are worth struggling for all on their own.

“What happens to your bond with your Malfoy if you do things only to please him?” Vera asked.

Harry’s face burned. Somehow, in the noble, high-minded moment when he had decided to contact Vera, he had forgotten that this would inevitably lead to discussion of Draco, and the physical pleasure that Draco was so eager to share with him. “He wouldn’t like it,” he admitted, once he saw that Vera was waiting for an answer and his embarrassment wouldn’t save him. “He’s said more than once that he wants me to reach out to him because I—"

Vera nodded. “So that is another thing you must learn to do. I think that learning to regard yourself as human and fallible comes first. But a good bit of selfishness would not go amiss. Listen to your own thoughts, the ones you ordinarily try to dismiss, the whims and momentary ideas.”

“You sound like Madam Shiverwood,” Harry complained.

“The woman who first tried to make you think about your abuse?” Vera cocked her head thoughtfully. “Well, I do not think it is necessary to make you regard the trial in any particular way. You have taken care of that very thoroughly on your own. You have spoken for your parents—I can see the cut that made on your soul—and that is all you owe them. But you must still deal with the legacy they have inflicted on you.”

Harry squirmed, keeping his eyes on his hand, which was clenched in a fist on his knee. “I meant that she wanted me to indulge my whims and do something pleasurable for myself once a day.”

Vera nodded. “So that is another thing you must learn to do. I think that learning to regard yourself as human and fallible comes first. But a good bit of selfishness would not go amiss. Listen to your own thoughts, the ones you ordinarily try to dismiss, the whims and momentary ideas.”

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“I do not think that is terrible advice, though too limited,” said Vera calmly. “You disagree?”

“I just—“ Harry wondered if he should phrase the idea differently, then decided that the phrasing was probably exactly the kind of thing Vera needed to hear. “I just don’t see the point,” he said. “They’re small things. Fleeting things. Whims, the way you and she both spoke of them. What good will it do if I decide to go flying for an hour one day? I might want to go flying, but I couldn’t abandon the Charms essay I’m working on, or the political letter I have to write, for the sake of indulging myself. They’re small. They don’t matter.”

“And if someone else wanted to go flying?” Vera asked. “Someone who had been through a trial—not a literal one, mind you, but a period of difficulty?” Harry’s mind skipped to Edith Bulstrode. “Would you think it was unimportant, if you believed it would aid their healing?”

“Of course not!” Harry exclaimed.
“And what if this would aid your own healing, Harry?”

“This is one of those places where you think I don’t regard myself as human, isn’t it,” said Harry flatly.

“Isn’t it?” Vera turned the question back on him.

“I just—” Harry leaned his head back on the chair and scowled at the ceiling. Instead of turning aside into the answers his training provided him, he tried to make himself ask the question head-on. Why should it be so different for him? If Edith could go flying because she wanted to, and it would help ease the lash-marks on her soul, why shouldn’t he be able to do the same?

He did have an answer in a moment, one he didn’t think Vera could refute. “Because I have responsibilities,” he said softly. “I don’t believe that I can do everything that needs to be done in a day and then push aside the rest until some unspecified time while I enjoy myself. Free time is just a myth.”

“For you,” said Vera.

But not for other people. Harry wished she would stop doing that. Now his mind was coming up with the answers on its own.

“I’m a leader,” said Harry. “People told me that I needed to accept that for so long, and I finally have. I’m vates, and I need to be a war leader, and I suppose I’m a political leader, too.” He made a face as he thought about it. He understood the pureblood dances, but so many of those were based on manners, or reciprocal gifts, or strength of magic—all things that his training had prepared him to deal with and accept as good standards for judgment. Politics seemed to be based mostly on people indulging their greed for more money and power, an impulse Harry couldn’t comprehend, and feeding their ridiculous prejudices, something he was determined to stop. “So doesn’t that mean that I should spend as much time as I can fulfilling my responsibilities?”

“As much time as you can? Perhaps. But do you really think that someone like Rufus Scrimgeour spends all his time working in politics alone, Harry, with never a moment for indulgence or himself?”

Harry was feeling decidedly cranky by this point. He was probably going to have some sort of revelation any moment, and he didn’t like them. They hurt. “He sleeps, of course,” he said shortly. “And I think he has a tea moment in the mornings that’s not to be interrupted. And he’s not married, but he probably doesn’t scabble among paperwork all the time.”

“Then why can’t you do the same?” Vera again cocked her head, like a bird eyeing a crumb it was about to peck up. “Do what you must, do what you can, do what opportunity presses you to do in the arena of politics, but then turn back and take some time for yourself. Fly, spend time with your Malfoy…” A moment later, she trailed off with a sigh. “That is another thing you will need to do, Harry. Find pleasures that do not involve protecting and saving people.”

“Learn to be selfish,” said Harry.

Vera nodded. “And now, I asked you a question. Why can’t you do the same?”

Harry hunched his shoulders. He hated the answer he was going to give. He knew it wasn’t an adequate answer. But he didn’t think that he had another one right now. “It’s just different for me, that’s all.”

“And why is that?”

“You’re not going to give up, are you?” Harry asked her, with a sharp glance.

“No,” Vera agreed peaceably.

Harry sighed. “Because my mother trained me to think of myself as different,” he said. “As someone who didn’t need as much as other people—as much pleasure, as much human contact, as much sleep, as much freedom from pain. And I know that’s the answer, but I can’t help thinking she was right in this much, most of the time. I mean, I can do this. Why shouldn’t I?”

“And you know the answer to that, too, where you would not have a year ago,” Vera murmured.

Harry clenched his hand. “Yes,” he said. “Because I deserve as much indulgence as anyone else.”

“I would call it a normal life, rather than indulgence,” said Vera softly. “Not being struck with pain curses seems normal to me, Harry. Tending to your own wants and needs seems normal. Balancing your intense devotion to the freedom of others with
devotion to your own freedom is, perhaps, not normal, because most people carry a devotion only to their own freedom, but still something a *vates* should do. Unless you truly believe that a *vates* need not see himself as clearly as he sees others?"


Vera made an abrupt, though still soft, noise of understanding. “*Ah.* That is what may be hindering you. I have not seen your soul in a year, Harry, and there are many changes to absorb. Until this moment, I was not sure how one new realization fitted in with the rest.” She raised a hand and moved it through the air, as if she were trying to maneuver a piece of an invisible puzzle into place. “Your training in resistance to pleasure.”

“I know that I have that,” Harry said defensively. “I’m working with Draco to overcome it.”

“Not just the pleasure of touch and human contact,” said Vera calmly. “Your mother conditioned you against all sorts of things.” She was still staring intently at the invisible puzzle. “The appreciation of the sweet taste of food. I suspect that may be one reason that you do not care that much about your meals, and can see eating only as fuel for your body, so that you may do more things for others. Does everything truly taste bland to you?”

“Not bland,” said Harry. “But I like porridge as well as anything else. It’s nourishing. It’s always on the table. I might as well eat it.”

Vera nodded. “And you do not think of sleep as a pleasure and a comfort, either, nor warmth. Thus you can ignore the need to rest in favor of doing something more—“ She paused, and Harry was reminded of Snape reading his thoughts with Legilimency, though there was no sensation of someone else moving about in his mind. "Productive, I think, is the word you use. And you can stand in the cold rain, as you were on the Tower, without a thought of getting sick.”

“I could always use a warming charm,” Harry suggested. “I am a wizard.”

“But you did not.”

“I didn’t think of it.”

“You must learn to think of it,” said Vera softly. “This is connected to learning to think of yourself as human, Harry, not different from it. It may be even more urgent. You are well used to conducting intellectual debates on the rights of others, and you can learn to apply that kind of thinking to yourself. But you accept pleasure as something inherent to other people. The right of someone else to eat chocolate and appreciate it is not something that even enters your head as a subject of debate. On the same note, you accept it as something separate from yourself. It would not enter your head to work to overcome that, either.” She looked directly into Harry’s eyes. “You have said that you are working on overcoming your fear of touch with your Malfoy. Did you start doing that for his sake, or yours?”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. *Merlin, Draco would kill me if he knew.* But Draco wasn’t here right now, and Harry was almost certain Vera already knew the answer to this. “His,” he whispered.

“That will not do, Harry,” Vera said. “If he ever found out, it would devastate him. Granted, I have not seen his soul in a year, either, but I glimpsed him last Halloween. He was obsessed with equality then. He does not want to leave you behind, and he does not want to be left behind, either. He wants your bond to be as pleasurable for you as it is for him, a source of comfort and strength—and not because you are doing what he wants with something that you don’t care that much about, your body. Try to learn to want this for its own sake, for your own sake.”

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“I am trying!” Harry opened his eyes and glared at her. “I am.”

“And what happens then?”

“I panic and pull away from him as quickly as I can.” Harry felt his cheeks burn again, but it was as much anger as embarrassment—anger mostly at himself, truth be told. “It feels too good. And what kind of a stupid idea is *that* to have?”

Vera shook her head. “That is another thing you cannot do, because you have done too much of it,” she said. “Condemning yourself for trained reactions. Learn to see yourself clearly, Harry. Never stop pushing. You have grabbed hold of that lesson, or you would not have contacted me. But also know when to *rest* from pushing. Do not try to do too much at once. Remind yourself that this is a long road to walk, and the end may not be in sight for a time.”

“I can live with not being like everyone else for a long time,” said Harry, shifting restlessly. “I did it for years, after all. But I
don’t think Draco should have to live with it.”

“Have you asked him how he feels about that?” said Vera. “I know he is more impatient than you are, but have you asked him?”

“Um. No.”

“Well, then,” said Vera. “I think that should be your first task, Harry, before we speak again. Talk to him honestly. Learn what he wants, instead of waiting for him to show you or simply assuming it from his reactions.”

“I can do it,” Harry said, now looking down at his feet. “But it sounds so stupid to say it out loud.”

Vera didn’t reply, and when Harry chanced a glance up at her, he found that she was smiling, eyes shining with something that might have been recollection.

“I think you will find, Harry,” she said, “that even fifteen-year-old boys are more than willing to speak on the subject matter of what they want, when you ask them.”

Harry felt himself blush again. Vera stood from her chair and held out her hand to him.

“Have patience,” she murmured. “With me, with him, with yourself. That last most of all. I will be here when you wish to speak with me again.”

“It won’t be boring for you to just stay in Hogwarts?” Harry scrutinized her face.

“Your Headmistress has a very interesting soul,” said Vera happily. “So does the woman who is part dragon. Talking with them alone can take up a good deal of my time. And you should worry about yourself first.” She stooped and gave him a kiss on the forehead. “Speak with him when you are ready. Take these two days to rest, to sleep, to dream, to do what you must. You deserve a rest before the next push.”

Harry nodded, and then left the room, stretching and flexing his shoulders as if he had wings. He felt a bit lighter, though he couldn’t account for that. Perhaps it was his clothes finally drying from the rain.

*

“Here I am, Harry.”

At least Harry wasn’t writing letters when Regulus surprised him this time, because he had promised himself he wouldn’t write any today. He was sitting on the bank of the lake, eyes closed and head leaning on a tree. Snape had obviously told Regulus where to find him, since Harry had set up a small charm to make people casually glance elsewhere. He didn’t want any reporters interviewing him about being the Boy-Who-Lived this weekend.

“Regulus.” He opened his eyes and smiled, standing with a stretch. He held out his hand, but was clasped and pulled into an embrace. Oh, well. I suspected that would happen.

“Are you all right?” Regulus murmured into his ear, his hands roughly massing his spine. Harry wriggled back into the sensation instead of hunching his shoulders as was his instinctive response, and reflected wistfully that sometimes, yes, it really might be nice to have two hands. Then one could do things like Regulus was doing.

“Yes,” said Harry. He received a snort and a sharp look of disbelief, and gave in. “Oh, all right, not completely. That’s one reason I wanted to talk to you. I know I said I didn’t want to talk about inheritances and bloodlines and things like that, and I still don’t want to talk about being Black heir,” he added warningly, as Regulus’s face brightened like a firework. “But I did remember Narcissa telling me once that Silver-Mirror was the most peaceful of the Black houses. Is that true? Because I think I’d like to see it. I’d like to go somewhere soothing.” Hogwarts was not that at the moment, with stares continually following him.

Regulus’s face moved into a smug smile. “Of course, Harry. And I’m very glad that you’re seeing the place where you might go for holidays in the future.” He held up one hand and laughed when Harry glared at him. “Just kidding. Let’s get beyond the wards, and I’ll Side-Along Apparate you.”

Harry nodded, and started to follow him, only to pause when he realized Regulus showed no sign of letting him go, but wanted to walk with an arm around his shoulders. Uneasily, Harry came up beside him and walked there.
Why are you uneasy? he thought, almost a ritual now after his talk with Vera last night. He had asked himself the same question when he woke this morning and immediately thought he should stop wasting time and get out of bed, and when he found himself avoiding foods he knew were sweet and savory for bland ones.

In this case, the answer was relatively simple. I don’t think he likes touching me. Why should he? I’m just me, not a child related to him by blood.

Harry sighed and reminded himself that he knew the answer to the answer. He loves me. There’s no rational reason for it that I know yet, but I know it’s true. And he seems to love me just the way I am, without demanding that I become Black heir to satisfy him.

It was very strange. Harry knew that he still did best with conditional love, not unconditional. But he made some effort to relax, and by the time he and Regulus got beyond the wards, he no longer felt as though the arm around his shoulders were a burden too heavy to carry.

Regulus drew him towards him once they were near Hogsmeade, and they Apparated. This time, the jump felt even longer than it had to Cobley-by-the-Sea. Harry wondered where they were going.

He found out when they appeared inside a shining place. Harry tilted his head back, staring. It looked as though they were at the center of a giant mirror, which he supposed was only appropriate, given the name of the place. But this was golden, not silver.

They stood on an immense round floor, beneath an immense round ceiling, in the center of which a single pool of golden light shone, like sunbeams continually gathered and given out again. Harry could see other colors moving in the pool—it wasn’t as bright as the sun, though he had afterimages dancing in front of his eyes when he looked away—but they always melted back into gold, into rich shades of life and light. No drops appeared to fall from the pool, except along slender chains that led to lamps on the walls. They would inch down, fill in the lamps and glimmer through the casings of what looked to Harry like dragonbone, and then inch back to the pool. Thus, under the dominant effect of the shifting pool, other radiances came slowly to life and as slowly died, and strange shadows sprang up and then descended again.

He traced his glance down the walls at last, but couldn’t tell what they were made of; the light danced on them in a way that might have fit metal, or wood, or stone. They were crowded with numerous paintings, though. Harry took a step forward, staring at a landscape of trees he had never seen before. Their leaves were silver-blue, and they rippled in a wind that seemed to blow on Harry’s face as he stood in front of the picture. Startled, he blinked.

“Welcome to Silver-Mirror, Harry,” Regulus said softly. “Though it could just as well be called Golden-Mirror, really.” He nodded at the paintings around the walls. “This is the place where the Blacks keep our most intensely magical possessions. They’re not weapons, but they are works of art.”

“What do they do?” Harry whispered. He had no doubt the pictures were wizarding portraits, but he had never seen as many without people before, and usually they depicted places more realistic and ordinary than these seemed to. He could see, besides the forest one that kept drawing his attention, one that showed a road seemingly made of starlight running under a dark sky, and one that came out on a high mountain ledge with a blue crystalline door to the side, and one that showed a sea made of fire, like a more violent version of the golden pool above their heads.

Regulus said nothing, but he was grinning when Harry looked over his shoulder. “Touch one and find out,” he invited.

Harry eyed his grin—it looked like the kind the Weasley twins used when they got up to an especially good prank—but he faced the forest one and stretched out his hand.

The sensation of wind grew stronger as he reached for it, and then he felt enveloped, as though he had stumbled over a cliff into a long drop. But there was cool earth beneath his feet, and a murmur of leaves over his head, and sweet air singing in his ears.

Harry lifted his head and stared in disbelief. He was beneath the silver-blue trees, which were revealed as giants, standing many times higher than his own head, their bark silver with swirling white patterns. The air around him was fresher than any he had ever smelled, even on the Northumberland beach at Midsummer. The grass was actually moss, which gave beneath his feet with a sighing musical sound and a scent like strawberries.

I don’t believe this, Harry thought, in a daze.

He turned his head, to see a picture on the trunk of the tree directly behind him. It gave a confused golden glimpse of Silver-Mirror, which Harry thought he wouldn’t have known how to make out if he hadn’t been there before. Regulus’s head was in the
middle of it, grinning madly.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” he asked.

Harry looked up at the trees around him again. This time, he could see things moving in the branches, as graceful and quick as monkeys, but with what looked like five legs. “What is this?” he whispered.

Regulus heard him, luckily, and answered. “Doors to other worlds,” he said. “We think. One of my ancestors, Neptune Black, painted them. We don’t know for certain if he made them up, or if he just had dreams of real other places and painted them. I think they’re real, though, because another of my ancestors found the artifact that Silver-Mirror is named for in one of them and brought it out. Old Neptune can’t have dreamed everything.”

“I have to admit,” said Harry, tilting his head back as he heard a song falling in the distance like chiming crystal, “I don’t know why the Blacks haven’t become filthy rich bringing out artifacts from these other worlds.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” said Regulus softly. “Either Neptune didn’t want it to work like that, or it was something inherent in his gift. You can only go into one of these portraits for an artistic or healing or protective motive. You could go to find a weapon that would let you help others, for example, but not a jeweled sword that you could sell for hundreds of Galleons. If you try to come here with a selfish motive, it’s just a pretty picture.”

Harry nodded slowly; he could see some of the drawbacks. “And of course you might not find what you were looking for in one picture, and you’d have to spend a lot of time searching all of them.”

Regulus made a little sound of agreement. “There are a few closely guarded secrets about some of the portraits, about what they lead to—maps of their worlds. I can’t reveal those even to you until you agree to become Black heir, thanks to the magic in them.” He happily ignored Harry’s mutter about “if I become Black heir.” “But they’re a wonderful heritage for someone like you, Harry. I know you would appreciate them.”

Harry felt a twinge in his chest, something shifting in his head. He thought he was having an idea, but he couldn’t make out the dimensions of it as yet. He asked slowly, “Can you send someone else into a picture?”

Regulus had his brows arched when Harry looked at him again. “Yes, you can. But you’d have to be pretty cunning to convince them to just go. Most wizards can sense the danger in a picture like this instinctively. And once someone outside the picture turns it to face the wall, that person can’t come back again.”

Harry snorted lightly. “So there goes my great plan for capturing Voldemort,” he said, but he tucked the idea into a corner of his brain. It might yet be useful.

Regulus grinned ruefully. “Yes. I told him all about these pictures when I was still a Death Eater. It’s one reason he wanted to take Silver-Mirror, why he was happy to have the Black heir as part of his entourage. He thought he could at least arrange to sell the pictures to raise money for his Death Eaters.” He extended a hand through the frame. “Ready to come back now?”

Harry took his hand, and once again stepped into what felt like a fall. But then he was standing on the floor of the circular room again.

“How many pictures are there?” he asked.

“An even thirteen,” said Regulus happily. “One each for the thirteen blazing dreams Neptune Black had throughout his life. I can’t wait until you do accept your inheritance, Harry. Then I can tell you all about the one that I think might be most—” Abruptly, his face paled, and he put one hand over his heart. Harry took a step towards him, his own heartbeat quickening in fear, but Regulus stood back up and shook his head wryly. “I’m fine,” he reassured Harry. “Just came too close to a secret the magic doesn’t want me to share until you’re actually confirmed.”

Harry frowned. “That’s strange, you know. I don’t think James’s inheritance ever did that to him with Lux Aeterna.” He was proud of himself, to find that he could say James’s name without trembling. But why should he tremble? The man was nothing to him now, certainly not his father. “It did just what he wanted, in fact. The wards kept out anyone he didn’t like.”

Regulus snorted. “That’s because the damn thing’s a linchpin. Light wizards and their linchpins!”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He had known that most Dark families didn’t use linchpins, but he had assumed the operation of their inheritance magic wasn’t that different. Obviously, he’d been wrong. He knew more about magical than blood heirs, and more
Regulus shook his head. “Each inheritance is linked to a person. It’s a subtle difference to most people, I grant you, but real. That’s why it was so important that Sirius—” His voice faltered on his brother’s name, then became brisk once more. “That Sirius have a spell designating him the Black heir,” he finished. “If he’d left it alone, the properties would still have belonged to me, since technically I was still alive. And if I had been dead, and Sirius hadn’t cast certain specific magic, then the inheritance would have gone to Bellatrix—not in common to Bellatrix and her sisters. That was part of the purpose of the pureblood dances, you know, to sound out who was best suited to be heir. It was the eldest child most of the time, since they’d have longer to train and prove themselves worthy before their parents died, but not always. Most Dark pureblood inheritances are bound to a person, and they’ll have conditions that can be changed—like the openness of the wards—and ones that can’t—like the charms locking my lips shut about those damn maps to anyone other than my heir.”

Harry stared at him, fascinated. “But then shouldn’t Narcissa have been unable to remove the weapons from the Black houses that she did?”

Regulus shrugged. “No. My ancestors considered old Neptune’s pictures the most valuable things the Blacks owned. There are protective charms on them, and on the vaults and the houses, but not on a lot of the other minor treasures we have. The current owner would have to specify, with rituals, that certain things could pass only to his heir if he really wanted to guard them. Sirius never thought he would have to, of course. As it was, since Narcissa could get in through the wards, and she was of Black blood, she could take almost anything she wanted.”

“Could a Light family’s inheritance be linked to a single person that way?” Harry asked.

Regulus snorted. “Of course. But good luck getting any of them to agree to it.”

_I bet Connor would_, Harry thought feverishly. _Maybe even Augustus Starrise, now that he’s my ally. And that would remove at least one linchpin, perhaps two._

He had some idea how to free the northern goblins now. He found himself smiling, and Regulus smiled back.

“I really didn’t bring you here to discuss inheritance,” Regulus said. “I promised. So come on, then, and we’ll see the artifact that gave Silver-Mirror its name.” He clapped Harry on the back and led him towards a door on the far wall which, with the charms of this room, Harry hadn’t even noticed. “You might have realized that a few of the other houses have elemental affiliations,” Regulus commented over his shoulder. “Number Twelve Grimmauld Place doesn’t, not really, but Cobley-by-the-Sea is water, and Wayhouse is earth, since it was built of wood. This is fire.” He nodded to the golden pool overhead.

Harry simply raised his eyebrows as he followed him through the door, but he felt his expression change with the movement of the air around him.

“And this part of Silver-Mirror,” Regulus whispered in his ear, “is wind.”

Harry couldn’t respond. For one thing, he wasn’t entirely sure that Regulus would hear him at anything other than a shout, but for another, he didn’t think the words could get around the lump in his throat.

They stood on a narrow balcony, beyond which probably lay a staircase. Harry couldn’t say for sure, because his eyes hadn’t adjusted that far yet. The immediate portion of the room was as dark as a cave, and led his gaze downwards, to Silver-Mirror itself.

A turning, shining pool lay there, like a complement to the golden one in the entrance room. Harry didn’t think it was water, though, not after Regulus’s words. It was wind made visible, crashing waves of air. It was beautiful, and even more alive than the shifting fire had been.

And _sound_. _Sound_ was everywhere, stroking his ears, murmuring with music. Harry heard nothing ugly there, or, if there was something ugly, it was taken up and woven into the immense pattern so that it sounded as natural and beautiful as the rest. The songs of sirens were there without the awful enchantment, and Fawkes’s voice, and the wild symphony of the frenzied Dark, and thunder, and the dash of falling rain, and voices singing lullabies.

Harry found himself putting out his hand. His sight was adjusting, now, to that intense, faraway silver light, and he could make
out winged shapes skimming through the air.

*Birds.*

They came and went, magical and mundane, wheeling in great flocks, though so enormous was the room that Harry didn’t feel overwhelmed by their numbers. He felt the same kind of exaltation he did when he was on his broom as he watched them: soaring, swooping, diving, folding their wings and plunging into Silver-Mirror as if it were water, circling, fluttering, nearly colliding with one another. Their voices trickled in and out of the din, which gave them back sounds as it chose, so that sometimes a swan’s voice seemed to come out of an eagle’s beak, or a phoenix’s sweet tunes from a Diricawl as it continually appeared and disappeared in midair. Harry tried to make out an order to their movements, but couldn’t. Or perhaps one existed, but it was beyond him.

He felt his mind clear as he watched them. By the time he came back to himself again, he’d had muscles relax that felt as if they had been tense since the trial, and Regulus had one arm firmly wrapped around his shoulders, and he didn’t mind at all.

“This is *brilliant,*” he whispered.

Regulus just squeezed his shoulder, and didn’t make any comment about inheritance at all, letting him simply be absorbed in his watching.

*

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, then told himself to stop that, because he was messing it up.

No, wait, his hair was always messy. He should stop this because he had no reason to be nervous. Draco was hardly going to object to what he wanted to say.

He entered his bedroom quietly, and jumped when he realized Blaise and Ginny were involved in a sloppy kiss against the far wall. He looked only long enough to make sure that Draco wasn’t on his bed, then slipped out and shut the door behind him.

“Awful, isn’t it?”

Harry jumped a second time; Draco was right beside him on the stairs. He shook his head at Harry. “They’re not done yet? I thought it was odd that Blaise asked for an hour of ‘study time’ this afternoon, but, well, he’s cleared out of the room for us before. I can at least repay the favor.”

“Let’s go somewhere else private, then, because I want to talk to you,” Harry told him.

Draco’s eyebrows rose, and he stared hard at Harry. Harry stared hard right back.

Draco smiled a bit, then, his lips quirking. He nodded. “Will I need the Pensieve?”

“Yes, if you want it,” said Harry, startled. He’d intended to keep his promise to Draco about putting his mindset in the Pensieve for Draco to experience, but he hadn’t thought he’d keep it so soon. Then he shrugged. *Oh, well. If he does have questions about why I’m talking to him like this, then he can understand them better once he experiences things from my side.*

Draco opened the door and sneaked into the bedroom to retrieve the Pensieve. That gave Harry a chance to lean back against the wall and ask himself why the hell he was so nervous.

*Because I don’t like all of this intensity focused on me. It can be focused on someone else, just not on me.*

Harry snorted a moment later. He could understand Vera now when she said that wasn’t good enough. He was becoming tired of his own insecurity on that score. He might not comprehend exactly why yet Draco was willing to focus so much on him, but he accepted that Draco wanted to. And he had admitted to himself that he was in love with Draco.

*You can do worse than indulge that, I think.*

Draco came back out a moment later, flourishing the Pensieve in triumph. They went upstairs to find an abandoned classroom, and, on the way, Harry decided to look at Draco and think about him without scolding himself for such silly and inappropriate thoughts.
It was remarkably easy, once he gave it free rein. He’d thought things like this before, he realized now, but had pushed them into the Occlumency pools rather than deal with them. Once he’d got past the first acknowledgement of his own desire, he could start thinking that it wasn’t silly or inappropriate after all.

Draco’s way of movement attracted him, he had to admit. It was partially training, born of pureblood dances that warned against revealing too much emotion with a careless gesture, but Harry knew exactly how someone trained exclusively in that way moved; Lucius Malfoy was like that. It made him into nothing so much as a breathing statue, lovely in stillness, too graceful in motion.

Draco blended that grace with a more human jerkiness, a remnant of the boy Harry remembered who had dragged him around half Hogwarts by one arm in first and second year. He paused to look around a corner and make sure they weren’t being observed, and then pulled his head back with a sharp oath as someone else came out of a door down the hall. He made constant arm-movements that showed his impatience. He tossed the Pensieve from hand to hand because he could. He did freeze up around his father, but away from Lucius, Harry could see Narcissa’s influence, the naturalness she’d passed on to her son.

Yes, so that attracted him, he told himself, pushing himself forward to consider these things, regardless of how silly it felt. And what else?

How expressive Draco’s face was—again, not something that a good pureblood wizard should necessarily show, but something Draco did. His eyes always showed an intense awareness and aliveness, an awakening to the world. Every part of his face was involved in his every emotion, not just a short curl of his lips for his disdain. His eyebrows would cant down and his cheeks would tighten and his eyes would get into the act, too.

And I never realized I paid enough attention to him to notice all that.

Harry swallowed nervously. He had accused himself, several times, of taking Draco for granted. Finding out he hadn’t been, at least on some levels, was unnerving.

It does mean I can change, then. I’m human somewhere under all this training, and I don’t know myself that well.

And that was terrifying.

“Harry?”

Harry started and glanced up. Draco had one hand reached out towards him, the other clutching the Pensieve white-knuckled. Harry let himself drink in the brightness of those eyes with concern, the way Draco had his head tilted to one side, the sharp angle of his eyebrows.

“Are you all right?” Draco whispered.

Harry nodded. “Just realizing that you’re beautiful to me in several ways,” he said. Oh, Merlin, let that not be soppy. Please.

But even if it was soppy, the look that came over Draco’s face immediately afterwards was worth it. Draco moved several steps nearer, and then cupped his chin and raised it. His eyes were intense, as piercing as thorns, but Harry felt the courage to offer himself up to them anyway. He won’t hurt me. I know he won’t hurt me. He would never hurt me.

Draco moved his face slowly nearer, but Harry was the one who leaned the rest of the way to initiate the kiss. That surprised a noise out of Draco that was certainly startled and might have been indignant, but Harry knew exactly how to silence that. He opened his mouth and let Draco slip his tongue inside.

Draco tried to say his name, but this, Harry decided immediately, was difficult when his tongue was where it was. Then his other hand slipped around Harry’s neck to hold him in place, dropping the Pensieve, and he was kissing Harry frantically, as if he thought the training would kick in at any moment.

The training was trying to kick in. Harry could feel shivers running up his spine that were not all pleasure, could feel the screaming thoughts that said he shouldn’t feel this good, he didn’t have the right—

Fuck off, he told his own thoughts, and put his Occlumency to good use, swallowing the protests of his training. There was sudden, wonderful silence in his head, silence that filled almost at once with the cloudy feeling he’d experienced the night Marietta used the Blood Whip Curse on him and Draco had tried to coax Harry to tell him his attacker’s name.

Harry tilted his head back, slipped his own arms around Draco’s neck and waist, and put his own tongue to good use, surprising
another one of those strangled sounds out of Draco. The cloudy feeling grew thicker and more intense, a sharp warmth invaded his belly, and Harry wondered if this was what eating chocolate was like for other people.

Draco drew slowly backwards at last, and stared down at Harry with his eyes alive in an expression that Harry definitely wanted to see again. Harry reached out and ran his hand down Draco’s chest, pulling back only reluctantly as he realized the cloudy feeling and the warmth lingered in his own body, and his training was protesting more strongly than it had before.

“Sorry,” he said.

“You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about.” Draco’s voice had deepened, and Harry found those intense eyes still focused on him when he looked up. They weren’t as far above him as they would have been a month ago, only an inch or two, and Harry grinned as he realized what that meant. *I’m getting another growth spurt, then. I might even be taller than he is one day.*

“I suppose not,” he agreed. “Do you want to do the Pensieve, still?”

“I’d rather hear what brought that kiss on.” Draco couldn’t stop looking at his lips as he said that. It amused Harry entirely too much, and even though the cloudy feeling and the warmth had knocked him somewhat off balance, he grinned as he nodded up the hall.

“Don’t you think we should get into the classrooms we were making for, and not have this conversation out in the hall where anyone could hear us?”

Horror flashed across Draco’s face at the thought, and then another intense look, though different by several degrees from the one he’d been giving Harry before. “Of course,” he said. “I’m not sharing you with anyone.”

Harry rolled his eyes as Draco picked up the Pensieve, then dragged him up the hallway by one arm. *Honestly. Like other people would want me with the same degree of possessiveness he does.*

All the same, Harry thought it was a good thing to get into a room where they could lock the door with spells, both because he wasn’t comfortable with anyone else seeing the way he acted around Draco yet and because he could easily imagine someone else wanting *Draco* the way he did. So, all in all, it was better just to get out of sight.

When they’d locked the door behind them, and Draco had cast several layers of wards, he turned around and demanded, “Well?”

“Vera’s here,” said Harry simply. “She came last night. She suggested I talk to you about what you want. I know what I do.” He eyed Draco’s face. “I’m surprised you had the strength to stop when you did, given how much you want,” he murmured.

Draco sat down in a chair as if his legs had given out. Unfortunately, the chair turned out to be broken, and dumped him on the floor amid an immense puff of dust. Harry started to snicker, but stopped when Draco raised his head.

The intense look was back in his eyes. Harry swallowed.

“I want everything you can give me,” said Draco. “All of what you are, Harry. I want to know things you don’t even think are important about yourself yet, like what kind of tea is your favorite. I want to know that no one else means as much to you as I do. I want to be the only person you want in your bed. I want to know that you understand the things I believe in even if you don’t agree with them. I want you to yell at me without holding anything back, even your magic. I want you to know my moods well enough that you know without my speaking when I need to be held, or fetched a sweet, or left alone. I want to have that kind of closeness to you that depends on choice more than it does need, and makes everyone jealous who sees it. I want sunlight love. I told you that, once, last year.”

Harry nodded, swallowing. It was a demanding list, and he could think of several things on it that he could not imagine, say, Parvati asking of Connor. But Draco was demanding. He had shown that well enough when their bond was just friendship. *And he wants those things of me.*

Like the fact that Draco loved him, it was just something that had to be accepted. And it sent a shiver of sweetness down Harry’s spine, and a tremor of a smugness that he didn’t understand at all.

*He wants those things of me.*

Harry blinked at nothing. *And? So? If he wanted them of someone else, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.*
The smugness stayed there anyway. Harry shivered again. He would have to learn plenty of things about himself, it seemed.

He stepped nearer to Draco and held out his hand. “And I want to give them to you,” he said, holding Draco’s eyes. “Some of them will take longer than others.”

“I. Don’t. Care.”

Harry tried to speak, but he thought he was probably going to sound stupid if he did. He settled for pulling Draco to his feet and wrapping him fiercely in his arms, settled for feeling warm, and safe, and loved.

Except that that’s not settling, not at all.

* * * * *

Chapter Forty-Seven: A Port in the Storm

Harry settled down with Vera in a small room on the sixth floor, furnished with thickly cushioned chairs—white, Harry wasn’t surprised to see, not after his glimpse of the Sanctuary in Peter’s mind last year—and with a fire blazing in a hearth larger than even the one in the hospital wing. Harry eyed the chairs cautiously. The wood appeared to have whorls of red in it. He didn’t think that kind of wood was ever used for chairs at Hogwarts.

He glanced at Vera, who simply smiled. “We bring a bit of the Sanctuary with us when we come to stay somewhere, Harry,” she said quietly. “And yes, I did clear this with your Headmistress. I could do nothing else, not when I hope to be by your side for a few months.”

A few months? Harry blinked. He hadn’t planned on that. He had planned on one of the Seers writing him, actually, with comfortably long gaps between the letters. He swallowed, and said, “I thought that Seers grew inundated with the sight of other souls, and had to retreat to the Sanctuary every once in a while?”

And that is why I shall be here until my gift gets the better of me,” Vera said. “But it will be some time before that happens, and I have long wanted to help you, Harry.” Her face grew brilliant with an expression that wasn’t really a smile. “You do not know how pleased I was when you wrote to me, and with no sign that someone else was forcing you to set quill to parchment.”

Harry swallowed a few times. He could do this. Just because it was going to be harder than he’d expected was no reason to abandon it. And he had made the decision on his own. That was important. It was not like the decision to bring his parents to trial or face Voldemort, which, important as they had turned out to be, had their ultimate origin in other people’s choices. This was born of his confrontation with himself in the Room of Requirement. He had to take an active part in his own healing, or it was foredoomed to fail.

And how many horrible things had he faced and fought his way through before?

“Did someone force you to write to me, Harry?” Vera’s voice was still soft, but tight now with anger. “If someone did—“

Harry lifted his head and shook it. “No. I did that on my own. And I’m ready to face what you have to tell me.”

Vera nodded, the brilliant look appearing again. She leaned forward. Harry tensed instinctively, but she was too far away from him to cup his face, though it looked as if she would have liked to.

“You will not be surprised,” she murmured, “to learn that you don’t really regard yourself as human, not yet. That is one of the things you must learn.”

Harry huffed and crossed his arms. “I thought I had made more progress than that. I don’t think of myself as less important than other people any more.”

“Your first thoughts are still of them, Harry.”

“And is that a bad thing?” Harry frowned as he thought of the short-sighted selfishness that had prompted the Ravenclaws’ actions against him, that had prompted Connor’s behavior in first year, that had made James into the kind of man he was, along with cowardice. “So many people think of themselves first. I might be a bit less selfish than most, but—“
“You know that it can hurt you,” said Vera softly. “More, it can hurt others. What happens if you take a curse for someone else and die in battle, Harry? What will happen to those who follow you, honor you, love you?”

Harry could feel his frown growing more pronounced. _They shouldn’t fight on one side of the war just because of a person. That’s like the Light families only fighting because Dumbledore led them, not because they think Voldemort’s an evil person or his ideals are wrong. I’ll have to show them that the ideals I represent are worth struggling for all on their own._

“What happens to your bond with your Malfoy if you do things only to please him?” Vera asked.

Harry’s face burned. Somehow, in the noble, high-minded moment when he had decided to contact Vera, he had forgotten that this would inevitably lead to discussion of Draco, and the physical pleasure that Draco was so eager to share with him. “He wouldn’t like it,” he admitted, once he saw that Vera was waiting for an answer and his embarrassment wouldn’t save him. “He’s said more than once that he wants me to reach out to him because _I_ want to.”

Vera nodded. “So that is another thing you must learn to do. I think that learning to regard yourself as human and fallible comes first. But a good bit of selfishness would not go amiss. Listen to your own thoughts, the ones you ordinarily try to dismiss, the whims and momentary ideas.”

“You sound like Madam Shiverwood,” Harry complained.

“The woman who first tried to make you think about your abuse?” Vera cocked her head thoughtfully. “Well, I do not think it is necessary to make you regard the trial in any particular way. You have taken care of that very thoroughly on your own. You have spoken for your parents—I can see the cut that made on your soul—and that is all you owe them. But you must still deal with the legacy they have inflicted on you.”

Harry squirmed, keeping his eyes on his hand, which was clenched in a fist on his knee. “I meant that she wanted me to indulge my whims and do something pleasurable for myself once a day.”

“I do not think that is terrible advice, though too limited,” said Vera calmly. “You disagree?”

“I just—“ Harry wondered if he should phrase the idea differently, then decided that the phrasing was probably exactly the kind of thing Vera needed to hear. “I just don’t see the point,” he said. “They’re small things. Fleeting things. Whims, the way you and she both spoke of them. What good will it do if I decide to go flying for an hour one day? I might want to go flying, but I couldn’t abandon the Charms essay I’m working on, or the political letter I have to write, for the sake of indulging myself. They’re small. They don’t matter.”

“And if someone else wanted to go flying?” Vera asked. “Someone who had been through a trial—not a literal one, mind you, but a period of difficulty?” Harry’s mind skipped to Edith Bulstrode. “Would you think it was unimportant, if you believed it would aid their healing?”

“Yes, of course not!” Harry exclaimed.

“And what if this would aid your own healing, Harry?”

“This is one of those places where you think I don’t regard myself as human, isn’t it,” said Harry flatly.

“Isn’t it?” Vera turned the question back on him.

“I just—“ Harry leaned his head back on the chair and scowled at the ceiling. Instead of turning aside into the answers his training provided him, he tried to make himself ask the question head-on. Why _should_ it be so different for him? If Edith could go flying because she wanted to, and it would help ease the lash-marks on her soul, why shouldn’t he be able to do the same?

He did have an answer in a moment, one he didn’t think Vera could refute. “Because I have responsibilities,” he said softly. “I don’t believe that I can do everything that needs to be done in a day and then push aside the rest until some unspecified time while I enjoy myself. Free time is just a myth.”

“For you,” said Vera.

_But not for other people_. Harry wished she would stop doing that. Now his mind was coming up with the answers on its own.

“I’m a leader,” said Harry. “People told me that I needed to accept that for so long, and I finally have. I’m _vates_, and I need to be
a war leader, and I suppose I’m a political leader, too.” He made a face as he thought about it. He understood the pureblood
dances, but so many of those were based on manners, or reciprocal gifts, or strength of magic—all things that his training had
prepared him to deal with and accept as good standards for judgment. Politics seemed to be based mostly on people indulging
their greed for more money and power, an impulse Harry couldn’t comprehend, and feeding their ridiculous prejudices,
something he was determined to stop. “So doesn’t that mean that I should spend as much time as I can fulfilling my
responsibilities?”

“As much time as you can? Perhaps. But do you really think that someone like Rufus Scrimgeour spends all his time working in
politics alone, Harry, with never a moment for indulgence or himself?”

Harry was feeling decidedly cranky by this point. He was probably going to have some sort of revelation any moment, and he
didn’t like them. They hurt. “He sleeps, of course,” he said shortly. “And I think he has a tea moment in the mornings that’s not to
be interrupted. And he’s not married, but he probably doesn’t scrounge among paperwork all the time.”

“Then why can’t you do the same?” Vera again cocked her head, like a bird eyeing a crumb it was about to peck up. “Do what
you must, do what you can, do what opportunity presses you to do in the arena of politics, but then turn back and take some time
for yourself. Fly, spend time with your Malfoy…” A moment later, she trailed off with a sigh. “That is another thing you will
need to do, Harry. Find pleasures that do not involve protecting and saving people.”

“Learn to be selfish,” said Harry.

Vera nodded. “And now, I asked you a question. Why can’t you do the same?”

Harry hunched his shoulders. He hated the answer he was going to give. He knew it wasn’t an adequate answer. But he didn’t
think that he had another one right now. “It’s just different for me, that’s all.”

“And why is that?”

“You’re not going to give up, are you?” Harry asked her, with a sharp glance.

“No,” Vera agreed peaceably.

Harry sighed. “Because my mother trained me to think of myself as different,” he said. “As someone who didn’t need as much as
other people—as much pleasure, as much human contact, as much sleep, as much freedom from pain. And I know that’s the
answer, but I can’t help thinking she was right in this much, most of the time. I mean, I can do this. Why shouldn’t I?”

“And you know the answer to that, too, where you would not have a year ago,” Vera murmured.

Harry clenched his hand. “Yes,” he said. “Because I deserve as much indulgence as anyone else.”

“I would call it a normal life, rather than indulgence,” said Vera softly. “Not being struck with pain curses seems normal to me,
Harry. Tending to your own wants and needs seems normal. Balancing your intense devotion to the freedom of others with
devotion to your own freedom is, perhaps, not normal, because most people carry a devotion only to their own freedom, but still
something a vates should do. Unless you truly believe that a vates need not see himself as clearly as he sees others?”


Vera made an abrupt, though still soft, noise of understanding. “Ah. That is what may be hindering you. I have not seen your soul
in a year, Harry, and there are many changes to absorb. Until this moment, I was not sure how one new realization fitted in with
the rest.” She raised a hand and moved it through the air, as if she were trying to maneuver a piece of an invisible puzzle into
place. “Your training in resistance to pleasure.”

“I know that I have that,” Harry said defensively. “I’m working with Draco to overcome it.”

“No just the pleasure of touch and human contact,” said Vera calmly. “Your mother conditioned you against all sorts of things.”
She was still staring intently at the invisible puzzle. “The appreciation of the sweet taste of food. I suspect that may be one reason
that you do not care that much about your meals, and can see eating only as fuel for your body, so that you may do more things
for others. Does everything truly taste bland to you?”

“No bland,” said Harry. “But I like porridge as well as anything else. It’s nourishing. It’s always on the table. I might as well eat
it.”
Vera nodded. “And you do not think of sleep as a pleasure and a comfort, either, nor warmth. Thus you can ignore the need to rest in favor of doing something more—” She paused, and Harry was reminded of Snape reading his thoughts with Legilimency, though there was no sensation of someone else moving about in his mind. “Productive, I think, is the word you use. And you can stand in the cold rain, as you were on the Tower, without a thought of getting sick.”

“I could always use a warming charm,” Harry suggested. “I am a wizard.”

“But you did not.”

“I didn’t think of it.”

“You must learn to think of it,” said Vera softly. “This is connected to learning to think of yourself as human, Harry, not different from it. It may be even more urgent. You are well used to conducting intellectual debates on the rights of others, and you can learn to apply that kind of thinking to yourself. But you accept pleasure as something inherent to other people. The right of someone else to eat chocolate and appreciate it is not something that even enters your head as a subject of debate. On the same note, you accept it as something separate from yourself. It would not enter your head to work to overcome that, either.” She looked directly into Harry’s eyes. “You have said that you are working on overcoming your fear of touch with your Malfoy. Did you start doing that for his sake, or yours?”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. *Merlin, Draco would kill me if he knew.* But Draco wasn’t here right now, and Harry was almost certain Vera already knew the answer to this. “His,” he whispered.

“That will not do, Harry,” Vera said. “If he ever found out, it would devastate him. Granted, I have not seen his soul in a year, either, but I glimpsed him last Halloween. He was obsessed with equality then. He does not want to leave you behind, and he does not want to be left behind, either. He wants your bond to be as pleasurable for you as it is for him, a source of comfort and strength—and not because you are doing what he wants with something that you don’t care that much about, your body. Try to learn to want this for its own sake, for your own sake.”

“I am trying!” Harry opened his eyes and glared at her. “I am.”

“And what happens then?”

“I panic and pull away from him as quickly as I can.” Harry felt his cheeks burn again, but it was as much anger as embarrassment—anger mostly at himself, truth be told. “It feels too good. And what kind of a stupid idea is that to have?”

Vera shook her head. “That is another thing you cannot do, because you have done too much of it,” she said. “Condemning yourself for trained reactions. Learn to see yourself clearly, Harry. Never stop pushing. You have grabbed hold of that lesson, or you would not have contacted me. But also know when to rest from pushing. Do not try to do too much at once. Remind yourself that this is a long road to walk, and the end may not be in sight for a time.”

“I can live with not being like everyone else for a long time,” said Harry, shifting restlessly. “I did it for years, after all. But I don’t think Draco should have to live with it.”

“Have you asked him how he feels about that?” said Vera. “I know he is more impatient than you are, but have you asked him?”

“Um. No.”

“Well, then,” said Vera. “I think that should be your first task, Harry, before we speak again. Talk to him honestly. Learn what he wants, instead of waiting for him to show you or simply assuming it from his reactions.”

“I can do it,” Harry said, now looking down at his feet. “But it sounds so stupid to say it out loud.”

Vera didn’t reply, and when Harry chanced a glance up at her, he found that she was smiling, eyes shining with something that might have been recollection.

“I think you will find, Harry,” she said, “that even fifteen-year-old boys are more than willing to speak on the subject matter of what they want, when you ask them.”

Harry felt himself blush again. Vera stood from her chair and held out her hand to him.
“Have patience,” she murmured. “With me, with him, with yourself. That last most of all. I will be here when you wish to speak with me again.”

“It won’t be boring for you to just stay in Hogwarts?” Harry scrutinized her face.

“Your Headmistress has a very interesting soul,” said Vera happily. “So does the woman who is part dragon. Talking with them alone can take up a good deal of my time. And you should worry about yourself first.” She stooped and gave him a kiss on the forehead. “Speak with him when you are ready. Take these two days to rest, to sleep, to dream, to do what you must. You deserve a rest before the next push.”

Harry nodded, and then left the room, stretching and flexing his shoulders as if he had wings. He felt a bit lighter, though he couldn’t account for that. Perhaps it was his clothes finally drying from the rain.

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“Here I am, Harry.”

At least Harry wasn’t writing letters when Regulus surprised him this time, because he had promised himself he wouldn’t write any today. He was sitting on the bank of the lake, eyes closed and head leaning on a tree. Snape had obviously told Regulus where to find him, since Harry had set up a small charm to make people casually glance elsewhere. He didn’t want any reporters interviewing him about being the Boy-Who-Lived this weekend.

“Regulus.” He opened his eyes and smiled, standing with a stretch. He held out his hand, but was clasped and pulled into an embrace. *Oh, well. I suspected that would happen.*

“Are you all right?” Regulus murmured into his ear, his hands roughly massing his spine. Harry wriggled back into the sensation instead of hunching his shoulders as was his instinctive response, and reflected wistfully that sometimes, yes, it really might be nice to have two hands. Then one could do things like Regulus was doing.

“Yes,” said Harry. He received a snort and a sharp look of disbelief, and gave in. “Oh, all right, not completely. That’s one reason I wanted to talk to you. I know I said I didn’t want to talk about inheritances and bloodlines and things like that, and I still don’t want to talk about being Black heir,” he added warily, as Regulus’s face brightened like a firework. “But I did remember Narcissa telling me once that Silver-Mirror was the most peaceful of the Black houses. Is that true? Because I think I’d like to see it. I’d like to go somewhere soothing.” Hogwarts was not that at the moment, with stares continually following him.

Regulus’s face moved into a smug smile. “Of course, Harry. And I’m very glad that you’re seeing the place where you might go for holidays in the future.” He held up one hand and laughed when Harry glared at him. “Just kidding. Let’s get beyond the wards, and I’ll Side-Along Apparate you.”

Harry nodded, and started to follow him, only to pause when he realized Regulus showed no sign of letting him go, but wanted to walk with an arm around his shoulders. Uneasily, Harry came up beside him and walked there.

Why are you uneasy? he thought, almost a ritual now after his talk with Vera last night. He had asked himself the same question when he woke this morning and immediately thought he should stop wasting time and get out of bed, and when he found himself avoiding foods he knew were sweet and savory for bland ones.

In this case, the answer was relatively simple. *I don’t think he likes touching me. Why should he? I’m just me, not a child related to him by blood.*

Harry sighed and reminded himself that he knew the answer to the answer. *He loves me. There’s no rational reason for it that I know yet, but I know it’s true. And he seems to love me just the way I am, without demanding that I become Black heir to satisfy him.*

It was very strange. Harry knew that he still did best with conditional love, not unconditional. But he made some effort to relax, and by the time he and Regulus got beyond the wards, he no longer felt as though the arm around his shoulders were a burden too heavy to carry.

Regulus drew him towards him once they were near Hogsmeade, and they Apparated. This time, the jump felt even longer than it had to Cobley-by-the-Sea. Harry wondered where they were going.

He found out when they appeared inside a shining place. Harry tilted his head back, staring. It looked as though they were at the
center of a giant mirror, which he supposed was only appropriate, given the name of the place. But this was golden, not silver.

They stood on an immense round floor, beneath an immense round ceiling, in the center of which a single pool of golden light shone, like sunbeams continually gathered and given out again. Harry could see other colors moving in the pool—it wasn’t as bright as the sun, though he had afterimages dancing in front of his eyes when he looked away—but they always melted back into gold, into rich shades of life and light. No drops appeared to fall from the pool, except along slender chains that led to lamps on the walls. They would inch down, fill in the lamps and glimmer through the casings of what looked to Harry like dragonbone, and then inch back to the pool. Thus, under the dominant effect of the shifting pool, other radiances came slowly to life and as slowly died, and strange shadows sprang up and then descended again.

He traced his glance down the walls at last, but couldn’t tell what they were made of; the light danced on them in a way that might have fit metal, or wood, or stone. They were crowded with numerous paintings, though. Harry took a step forward, staring at a landscape of trees he had never seen before. Their leaves were silver-blue, and they rippled in a wind that seemed to blow on Harry’s face as he stood in front of the picture. Startled, he blinked.

“Welcome to Silver-Mirror, Harry,” Regulus said softly. “Though it could just as well be called Golden-Mirror, really.” He nodded at the paintings around the walls. “This is the place where the Blacks keep our most intensely magical possessions. They’re not weapons, but they are works of art.”

“What do they do?” Harry whispered. He had no doubt the pictures were wizarding portraits, but he had never seen as many without people before, and usually they depicted places more realistic and ordinary than these seemed to. He could see, besides the forest one that kept drawing his attention, one that showed a road seemingly made of starlight running under a dark sky, and one that came out on a high mountain ledge with a blue crystalline door to the side, and one that showed a sea made of fire, like a more violent version of the golden pool above their heads.

Regulus said nothing, but he was grinning when Harry looked over his shoulder. “Touch one and find out,” he invited.

Harry eyed his grin—it looked like the kind the Weasley twins used when they got up to an especially good prank—but he faced the forest one and stretched out his hand.

The sensation of wind grew stronger as he reached for it, and then he felt enveloped, as though he had stumbled over a cliff into a long drop. But there was cool earth beneath his feet, and a murmur of leaves over his head, and sweet air singing in his ears.

Harry lifted his head and stared in disbelief. He was beneath the silver-blue trees, which were revealed as giants, standing many times higher than his own head, their bark silver with swirling white patterns. The air around him was fresher than any he had ever smelled, even on the Northumberland beach at Midsummer. The grass was actually moss, which gave beneath his feet with a sighing musical sound and a scent like strawberries.

I don’t believe this, Harry thought, in a daze.

He turned his head, to see a picture on the trunk of the tree directly behind him. It gave a confused golden glimpse of Silver-Mirror, which Harry thought he wouldn’t have known how to make out if he hadn’t been there before. Regulus’s head was in the middle of it, grinning madly.

“What is this?” he asked.

Regulus heard him, luckily, and answered. “Doors to other worlds,” he said. “We think. One of my ancestors, Neptune Black, painted them. We don’t know for certain if he made them up, or if he just had dreams of real other places and painted them. I think they’re real, though, because another of my ancestors found the artifact that Silver-Mirror is named for in one of them and brought it out. Old Neptune can’t have dreamed everything.”

“I have to admit,” said Harry, tilting his head back as he heard a song falling in the distance like chiming crystal, “I don’t know why the Blacks haven’t become filthy rich bringing out artifacts from these other worlds.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” said Regulus softly. “Either Neptune didn’t want it to work like that, or it was something inherent in his gift. You can only go into one of these portraits for an artistic or healing or protective motive. You could go to find a weapon that would let you help others, for example, but not a jeweled sword that you could sell for hundreds of Galleons. If you try to come here with a selfish motive, it’s just a pretty picture.”
Harry nodded slowly; he could see some of the drawbacks. “And of course you might not find what you were looking for in one picture, and you’d have to spend a lot of time searching all of them.”

Regulus made a little sound of agreement. “There are a few closely guarded secrets about some of the portraits, about what they lead to—maps of their worlds. I can’t reveal those even to you until you agree to become Black heir, thanks to the magic in them.” He happily ignored Harry’s mutter about “if I become Black heir.” “But they’re a wonderful heritage for someone like you, Harry. I know you would appreciate them.”

Harry felt a twinge in his chest, something shifting in his head. He thought he was having an idea, but he couldn’t make out the dimensions of it as yet. He asked slowly, “Can you send someone else into a picture?”

Regulus had his brows arched when Harry looked at him again. “Yes, you can. But you’d have to be pretty cunning to convince them to just go. Most wizards can sense the danger in a picture like this instinctively. And once someone outside the picture turns it to face the wall, that person can’t come back again.”

Harry snorted lightly. “So there goes my great plan for capturing Voldemort,” he said, but he tucked the idea into a corner of his brain. It might yet be useful.

Regulus grinned ruefully. “Yes. I told him all about these pictures when I was still a Death Eater. It’s one reason he wanted to take Silver-Mirror, why he was happy to have the Black heir as part of his entourage. He thought he could at least arrange to sell the pictures to raise money for his Death Eaters.” He extended a hand through the frame. “Ready to come back now?”

Harry took his hand, and once again stepped into what felt like a fall. But then he was standing on the floor of the circular room again.

“How many pictures are there?” he asked.

“An even thirteen,” said Regulus happily. “One each for the thirteen blazing dreams Neptune Black had throughout his life. I can’t wait until you do accept your inheritance, Harry. Then I can tell you all about the one that I think might be most—“

Abruptly, his face paled, and he put one hand over his heart. Harry took a step towards him, his own heartbeat quickening in fear, but Regulus stood back up and shook his head wryly. “I’m fine,” he reassured Harry. “Just came too close to a secret the magic doesn’t want me to share until you’re actually confirmed.”

Harry frowned. “That’s strange, you know. I don’t think James’s inheritance ever did that to him with Lux Aeterna.” He was proud of himself, to find that he could say James’s name without trembling. But why should he tremble? The man was nothing to him now, certainly not his father. “It did just what he wanted, in fact. The wards kept out anyone he didn’t like.”

Regulus snorted. “That’s because the damn thing’s a linchpin. Light wizards and their linchpins!”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He had known that most Dark families didn’t use linchpins, but he had assumed the operation of their inheritance magic wasn’t that different. Obviously, he’d been wrong. He knew more about magical than blood heirs, and more about sheer formal customs of inheritance, such as the acknowledgement festivals held for magical heirs, then either. Information about just how exactly Dark purebloods transferred property and money down the family line wasn’t easy to come by for someone born outside their circles, even Lily Potter or Dumbledore, while many dances were a matter of public record. “So the Black houses aren’t linked to the earth?”

Regulus shook his head. “Each inheritance is linked to a person. It’s a subtle difference to most people, I grant you, but real. That’s why it was so important that Sirius—“ His voice faltered on his brother’s name, then became brisk once more. “That Sirius have a spell designating him the Black heir,” he finished. “If he’d left it alone, the properties would still have belonged to me, since technically I was still alive. And if I had been dead, and Sirius hadn’t cast certain specific magic, then the inheritance would have gone to Bellatrix—not in common to Bellatrix and her sisters. That was part of the purpose of the pureblood dances, you know, to sound out who was best suited to be heir. It was the eldest child most of the time, since they’d have longer to train and prove themselves worthy before their parents died, but not always. Most Dark pureblood inheritances are bound to a person, and they’ll have conditions that can be changed—like the openness of the wards—and ones that can’t—like the charms locking my lips shut about those damn maps to anyone other than my heir.”

Harry stared at him, fascinated. “But then shouldn’t Narcissa have been unable to remove the weapons from the Black houses that she did?”

Regulus shrugged. “No. My ancestors considered old Neptune’s pictures the most valuable things the Blacks owned. There are
protective charms on them, and on the vaults and the houses, but not on a lot of the other minor treasures we have. The current owner would have to specify, with rituals, that certain things could pass only to his heir if he really wanted to guard them. Sirius never thought he would have to, of course. As it was, since Narcissa could get in through the wards, and she was of Black blood, she could take almost anything she wanted.”

“Could a Light family’s inheritance be linked to a single person that way?” Harry asked.

Regulus snorted. “Of course. But good luck getting any of them to agree to it.”

_I bet Connor would_, Harry thought feverishly. _Maybe even Augustus StARRYse, now that he’s my ally. And that would remove at least one linchpin, perhaps two._

He had some idea how to free the northern goblins now. He found himself smiling, and Regulus smiled back.

“I really didn’t bring you here to discuss inheritance,” Regulus said. “I promised. So come on, then, and we’ll see the artifact that gave Silver-Mirror its name.” He clapped Harry on the back and led him towards a door on the far wall which, with the charms of this room, Harry hadn’t even noticed. “You might have realized that a few of the other houses have elemental affiliations,” Regulus commented over his shoulder. “Number Twelve Grimmauld Place doesn’t, not really, but Cobley-by-the-Sea is water, and Wayhouse is earth, since it was built of wood. This is fire.” He nodded to the golden pool overhead.

Harry simply raised his eyebrows as he followed him through the door, but he felt his expression change with the movement of the air around him.

“And this part of Silver-Mirror,” Regulus whispered in his ear, “is wind.”

Harry couldn’t respond. For one thing, he wasn’t entirely sure that Regulus would hear him at anything other than a shout, but for another, he didn’t think the words could get around the lump in his throat.

They stood on a narrow balcony, beyond which probably lay a staircase. Harry couldn’t say for sure, because his eyes hadn’t adjusted that far yet. The immediate portion of the room was as dark as a cave, and led his gaze downwards, to Silver-Mirror itself.

A turning, shining pool lay there, like a complement to the golden one in the entrance room. Harry didn’t think it was water, though, not after Regulus’s words. It was wind made visible, crashing waves of air. It was beautiful, and even more alive than the shifting fire had been.

And sound. Sound was everywhere, stroking his ears, murmuring with music. Harry heard nothing ugly there, or, if there was something ugly, it was taken up and woven into the immense pattern so that it sounded as natural and beautiful as the rest. The songs of sirens were there without the awful enchantment, and Fawkes’s voice, and the wild symphony of the frenzied Dark, and thunder, and the dash of falling rain, and voices singing lullabies.

Harry found himself putting out his hand. His sight was adjusting, now, to that intense, faraway silver light, and he could make out winged shapes skimming through the air.

_Birds._

They came and went, magical and mundane, wheeling in great flocks, though so enormous was the room that Harry didn’t feel overwhelmed by their numbers. He felt the same kind of exaltation he did when he was on his broom as he watched them: soaring, swooping, diving, folding their wings and plunging into Silver-Mirror as if it were water, circling, fluttering, nearly colliding with one another. Their voices trickled in and out of the din, which gave them back sounds as it chose, so that sometimes a swan’s voice seemed to come out of an eagle’s beak, or a phoenix’s sweet tunes from a Diricawl as it continually appeared and disappeared in midair. Harry tried to make out an order to their movements, but couldn’t. Or perhaps one existed, but it was beyond him.

He felt his mind clear as he watched them. By the time he came back to himself again, he’d had muscles relax that felt as if they had been tense since the trial, and Regulus had one arm firmly wrapped around his shoulders, and he didn’t mind at all.

“This is brilliant,” he whispered.

Regulus just squeezed his shoulder, and didn’t make any comment about inheritance at all, letting him simply be absorbed in his watching.
Harry ran his fingers through his hair, then told himself to stop that, because he was messing it up.

No, wait, his hair was always messy. He should stop this because he had no reason to be nervous. Draco was hardly going to object to what he wanted to say.

He entered his bedroom quietly, and jumped when he realized Blaise and Ginny were involved in a sloppy kiss against the far wall. He looked only long enough to make sure that Draco wasn’t on his bed, then slipped out and shut the door behind him.

“Aawful, isn’t it?”

Harry jumped a second time; Draco was right beside him on the stairs. He shook his head at Harry. “They’re not done yet? I thought it was odd that Blaise asked for an hour of ‘study time’ this afternoon, but, well, he’s cleared out of the room for us before. I can at least repay the favor.”

“Let’s go somewhere else private, then, because I want to talk to you,” Harry told him.

Draco’s eyebrows rose, and he stared hard at Harry. Harry stared hard right back.

Draco smiled a bit, then, his lips quirking. He nodded. “Will I need the Pensieve?”

“Yes, if you want it,” said Harry, startled. He'd intended to keep his promise to Draco about putting his mindset in the Pensieve for Draco to experience, but he hadn’t thought he’d keep it so soon. Then he shrugged. Oh, well. If he does have questions about why I’m talking to him like this, then he can understand them better once he experiences things from my side.

Draco opened the door and sneaked into the bedroom to retrieve the Pensieve. That gave Harry a chance to lean back against the wall and ask himself why the hell he was so nervous.

Because I don’t like all of this intensity focused on me. It can be focused on someone else, just not on me.

Harry snorted a moment later. He could understand Vera now when she said that wasn’t good enough. He was becoming tired of his own insecurity on that score. He might not comprehend exactly why yet Draco was willing to focus so much on him, but he accepted that Draco wanted to. And he had admitted to himself that he was in love with Draco.

You can do worse than indulge that, I think.

Draco came back out a moment later, flourishing the Pensieve in triumph. They went upstairs to find an abandoned classroom, and, on the way, Harry decided to look at Draco and think about him without scolding himself for such silly and inappropriate thoughts.

It was remarkably easy, once he gave it free rein. He’d thought things like this before, he realized now, but had pushed them into the Occlumency pools rather than deal with them. Once he’d got past the first acknowledgement of his own desire, he could start thinking that it wasn’t silly or inappropriate after all.

Draco’s way of movement attracted him, he had to admit. It was partially training, born of pureblood dances that warned against revealing too much emotion with a careless gesture, but Harry knew exactly how someone trained exclusively in that way moved; Lucius Malfoy was like that. It made him into nothing so much as a breathing statue, lovely in stillness, too graceful in motion.

Draco blended that grace with a more human jerkiness, a remnant of the boy Harry remembered who had dragged him around half Hogwarts by one arm in first and second year. He paused to look around a corner and make sure they weren’t being observed, and then pulled his head back with a sharp oath as someone else came out of a door down the hall. He made constant arm-movements that showed his impatience. He tossed the Pensieve from hand to hand because he could. He did freeze up around his father, but away from Lucius, Harry could see Narcissa’s influence, the naturalness she’d passed on to her son.

Yes, so that attracted him, he told himself, pushing himself forward to consider these things, regardless of how silly it felt. And what else?

How expressive Draco’s face was—again, not something that a good pureblood wizard should necessarily show, but something Draco did. His eyes always showed an intense awareness and aliveness, an awakening to the world. Every part of his face was
involved in his every emotion, not just a short curl of his lips for his disdain. His eyebrows would cant down and his cheeks would tighten and his eyes would get into the act, too.

*And I never realized I paid enough attention to him to notice all that.*

Harry swallowed nervously. He had accused himself, several times, of taking Draco for granted. Finding out he hadn’t been, at least on some levels, was unnerving.

*It does mean I can change, then. I’m human somewhere under all this training, and I don’t know myself that well.*

And that was terrifying.

“Harry?”

Harry started and glanced up. Draco had one hand reached out towards him, the other clutching the Pensieve white-knuckled. Harry let himself drink in the brightness of those eyes with concern, the way Draco had his head tilted to one side, the sharp angle of his eyebrows.

“Are you all right?” Draco whispered.

Harry nodded. “Just realizing that you’re beautiful to me in several ways,” he said. *Oh, Merlin, let that not be soppy. Please.*

But even if it was soppy, the look that came over Draco’s face immediately afterwards was worth it. Draco moved several steps nearer, and then cupped his chin and raised it. His eyes were intense, as piercing as thorns, but Harry felt the courage to offer himself up to them anyway. *He won’t hurt me. I know he won’t hurt me. He would never hurt me.*

Draco moved his face slowly nearer, but Harry was the one who leaned the rest of the way to initiate the kiss. That surprised a noise out of Draco that was certainly startled and might have been indignant, but Harry knew exactly how to silence that. He opened his mouth and let Draco slip his tongue inside.

Draco tried to say his name, but this, Harry decided immediately, was difficult when his tongue was where it was. Then his other hand slipped around Harry’s neck to hold him in place, dropping the Pensieve, and he was kissing Harry frantically, as if he thought the training would kick in at any moment.

The training was *trying* to kick in. Harry could feel shivers running up his spine that were not all pleasure, could feel the screaming thoughts that said he shouldn’t feel this good, he didn’t have the right—

*Fuck off,* he told his own thoughts, and put his Occlumency to good use, swallowing the protests of his training. There was sudden, wonderful silence in his head, silence that filled almost at once with the cloudy feeling he’d experienced the night Marietta used the Blood Whip Curse on him and Draco had tried to coax Harry to tell him his attacker’s name.

Harry tilted his head back, slipped his own arms around Draco’s neck and waist, and put his own tongue to good use, surprising another one of those strangled sounds out of Draco. The cloudy feeling grew thicker and more intense, a sharp warmth invaded his belly, and Harry wondered if this was what eating chocolate was like for other people.

Draco drew slowly backwards at last, and stared down at Harry with his eyes alive in an expression that Harry *definitely* wanted to see again. Harry reached out and ran his hand down Draco’s chest, pulling back only reluctantly as he realized the cloudy feeling and the warmth lingered in his own body, and his training was protesting more strongly than it had before.

“Sorry,” he said.

“You have absolutely *nothing* to be sorry about.” Draco’s voice had deepened, and Harry found those intense eyes still focused on him when he looked up. They weren’t as far above him as they would have been a month ago, only an inch or two, and Harry grinned as he realized what that meant. *I’m getting another growth spurt, then. I might even be taller than he is one day.*

“I suppose not,” he agreed. “Do you want to do the Pensieve, still?”

“I’d rather hear what brought that kiss on.” Draco couldn’t stop looking at his lips as he said that. It amused Harry entirely too much, and even though the cloudy feeling and the warmth had knocked him somewhat off balance, he grinned as he nodded up the hall.
“Don’t you think we should get into the classrooms we were making for, and not have this conversation out in the hall where anyone could hear us?”

Horror flashed across Draco’s face at the thought, and then another intense look, though different by several degrees from the one he’d been giving Harry before. “Of course,” he said. “I’m not sharing you with anyone.”

Harry rolled his eyes as Draco picked up then Pensieve, then dragged him up the hallway by one arm. Honestly. Like other people would want me with the same degree of possessiveness he does.

All the same, Harry thought it was a good thing to get into a room where they could lock the door with spells, both because he wasn’t comfortable with anyone else seeing the way he acted around Draco yet and because he could easily imagine someone else wanting Draco the way he did. So, all in all, it was better just to get out of sight.

When they’d locked the door behind them, and Draco had cast several layers of wards, he turned around and demanded, “Well?”

“Vera’s here,” said Harry simply. “She came last night. She suggested I talk to you about what you want. I know what I do.” He eyed Draco’s face. “I’m surprised you had the strength to stop when you did, given how much you want,” he murmured.

Draco sat down in a chair as if his legs had given out. Unfortunately, the chair turned out to be broken, and dumped him on the floor amid an immense puff of dust. Harry started to snicker, but stopped when Draco raised his head.

The intense look was back in his eyes. Harry swallowed.

“I want everything you can give me,” said Draco. “All of what you are, Harry. I want to know things you don’t even think are important about yourself yet, like what kind of tea is your favorite. I want to know that no one else means as much to you as I do. I want to be the only person you want in your bed. I want to know that you understand the things I believe in even if you don’t agree with them. I want you to yell at me without holding anything back, even your magic. I want you to know my moods well enough that you know without my speaking when I need to be held, or fetched a sweet, or left alone. I want to have that kind of closeness to you that depends on choice more than it does need, and makes everyone jealous who sees it. I want sunlight love. I told you that, once, last year.”

Harry nodded, swallowing. It was a demanding list, and he could think of several things on it that he could not imagine, say, Parvati asking of Connor. But Draco was demanding. He had shown that well enough when their bond was just friendship. And he wants those things of me.

Like the fact that Draco loved him, it was just something that had to be accepted. And it sent a shiver of sweetness down Harry’s spine, and a tremor of a smugness that he didn’t understand at all.

He wants those things of me.

Harry blinked at nothing. And? So? If he wanted them of someone else, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.

The smugness stayed there anyway. Harry shivered again. He would have to learn plenty of things about himself, it seemed.

He stepped nearer to Draco and held out his hand. “And I want to give them to you,” he said, holding Draco’s eyes. “Some of them will take longer than others.”

“I. Don’t. Care.”

Harry tried to speak, but he thought he was probably going to sound stupid if he did. He settled for pulling Draco to his feet and wrapping him fiercely in his arms, settled for feeling warm, and safe, and loved.

Except that that’s not settling, not at all.

_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

Chapter Forty-Eight: Back Into the Raging World

Harry sighed as he sat in the Slytherin common room and stared down at the stack of letters the owls—and one large, proud, black-shouldered gull come from the Isle of Man—had delivered over the weekend. He had to deal with them now, since it was
Monday morning, the end of his weekend of relaxation, and visions of letters piling up on his bed canopy and crushing him had plagued him last night. He reached for the ones he knew he was going to dislike most, the letters from Compton Belville and Adelina Burke, first.

A few minutes later, he was gaping at the letters, and wondering if they were some practical joke. But no, when he fetched his last letters from the Burkes and Belvilles and compared them to the writing on these, the hand was the same. Harry sat back on the couch, feeling almost nerveless.

It seemed that the trial had changed Compton Belville’s mind about him rather decisively.

Dear Harry:

I will give no last name, as I have just heard that you renounced your last name. Congratulations on your victory in the trial. After what your parents did to you, it would have been a waste for them to die and escape punishment so easily, and if they were free, they would not have lasted long. I would have taken a hand in insuring that myself, were I not sure that many, many more who deserve to take vengeance for you would get there before I could.

Forgive me for having doubted you. I did think you were a child who could be easily approached and toyed with, that you knew nothing of the way the world really worked, because you did not use your magical power to gain what you wanted. I see now that you were playing with a subtler hand. Lords often do, and those of us who can only look at them in awe tend to miss those subtleties in our own envy.

I would like to offer you my family’s help in your alliance, specifically your next battle with the Dark Lord. We are older wizards and witches, with the exception of Mortimer, but not without experience. We are willing to come and speak to the other members of your alliance whenever you wish us to come. I hope that you will not think my having seen sixty-seven years in this world puts me beyond the honor of helping you.

I am yours, my lord, whenever you wish to call me.

Compton Belville.

Adelina Burke’s was almost the same, unctuous flattery and heaping praises, with the exception of the paragraph at the end.

I understand that you may feel you have no family now, Harry, since families are so valued in our world and you have rejected your last name, but I promise that one awaits you wherever you wish to seek it. Many families would be honored to have a son so powerful and decisive. I offer you the last name of Burke in the spirit of humility, should you ever wish to take it.

Adelina Burke.

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. He supposed he should have anticipated this, really. There were some wizards who would think he was vulnerable without a blood family at his back—and who wouldn’t accept that one brother the same age as himself counted as a blood family. He had magical power, and they would probably think that he had political power, after the way he’d swayed the Wizengamot, though Harry thought that was more just being a vates. He was young enough to make the question of legal guardianship appropriate, if not yet the question of marriage or joining. His parents were most definitely safely out of the way, as safe as they could be without death, and would not challenge the rejection of his surname. And…

Harry sighed. And my current legal guardian is a former Death Eater who was tried for use of an illegal potion within the last year. And he just killed Gilbert Rovenan. Not hard to stir up stories about him, even if they don’t dare accuse him outright. And rumors are harder to fight than accusations.

He felt a slight stirring of unease, then, like a prickling of claws up his spine. Should he repair his relationship with Snape, just to show everyone who might come sniffing around him that he was attached to his current guardian enough to reject anyone who tried to substitute for him?

No. When I reconcile with Snape, it has to be genuine. I can’t do it just because other wizards and witches can’t take a hint. Harry shifted restlessly on the couch and stared at the letters in his hand again. Never mind that I don’t intend to take another surname until I’m damn good and ready, since I can afford to be choosy, and maybe not even then. There was something appealing about remaining just “Harry” for the rest of his life, forcing everyone to address him by his name instead of some stupid and contrived title. He was morbidly curious about what was going to happen in his classes, particularly with teachers like McGonagall and Flitwick who liked to be formal with him in public.
In the end, it was easy to decide what to reply to Burke and Belville—a formal acceptance of their new offers of help, along with hints that he could not possibly consider any closer connection, either as an adopted son of the family or an adopted lord, than he had right now, since he was still caught up in the throes of grief from the trial. They would lap it up and respond annoyingly, but it was better than having them sniffing along a trail that might be truly bothersome. Harry sealed the letters with magic and laid them aside; he would have to take a trip up to the Owlery before he went to breakfast.

The next letter was the one the gull had brought. The gull had apparently stayed in the Owlerly, screeching and irritating the owls to no end, and now, since it was probably magically linked to the letter, it came sliding in through the door of the Slytherin common room as it opened behind a yawning seventh-year just stumbling in to bed. The seventh-year eyed Harry, and then went on her way, shaking her head and muttering about idiot Lords who didn’t get to bed at a decent time. The gull landed on Harry’s knee and proceeded to look bright and helpful until Harry shooed it away so he could spread Paton Opalline’s letter on his knee and read, whereupon it perched on the couch and looked bright and helpful for about three seconds, when it pecked him.

Harry shook his head—he thought he could see, now, why Honoria’s Animagus form was a gull—and turned his attention to the letter.

Dear Harry:

First of all, my condolences and my congratulations on the trial. I cannot imagine that it comforted you much, if at all, to hear the sentences of your parents, but I will say that it is better than having them free. And your severing of ties with them is probably what will do you the most good, in the end. It will allow you to grow on your own, without the shadow of a poisonous tree looming over you.

Now, to business. I did promise you that the Opalline spy network is yours now, and that my relatives are spread out in many directions, over Europe as well as the British Isles. It is from Europe that my most urgent news comes.

Two of my cousins in Bulgaria report that Durmstrang has gone silent. No owls leave it, and the ones who try to approach it are turned away by what appears to be a lightning ward—a complicated Dark Arts spell that applies more force than necessary, and often kills. Parents who have tried to reach the school to inquire about their children cannot do so. Neither Apparition nor Portkeys work on school grounds, and no child has been seen outside for a week now.

I am not entirely sure of what this means, and neither are my cousins, but they have gathered rumors and passed them along to me in the absence of concrete information. The old Headmaster, Karkaroff, now a known Death Eater, recruited at the school last year. My cousins worry that his trainees may have taken over Durmstrang and are trying to use the other students as hostages or potential fighters for the Dark Lord. I am not entirely sure what I believe myself, but I thought you would wish to know of this as soon as possible.

Harry closed his eyes, imagining what Charles Rosier-Henlin must feel like at the moment. Both his sons attended Durmstrang.

Of course, does he know? Harry opened his eyes and looked at the two letters he had waiting after this one again. No, there was most definitely not a letter from Charles, and Harry couldn’t imagine the man not appealing to him for help in a situation like this, even during the trial. If he didn’t write his sons often, then he might not know about the silence, and of course an owl took a long time to fly from Britain to Durmstrang…

I’ll write him this morning, Harry decided, and turned back to Paton’s letter.

The Veela of Southern Europe are considering an alliance with you, two of my aunts living there have reported. However, you should not necessarily depend on them. Unless they are attacked directly—and the Dark Lord has not yet made an overture of either threat or good will to them—the Veela’s Council requires a unanimous vote for such an alliance, and they have several hundred members. They will be bogged down in discussion and argument for a long time yet.

There have been several wizards seen approaching giant territory in the last little while. Most of them were killed, two fled, but one has not returned. My brother Gilander fears that this wizard remains in negotiation with the giants, and that he is perhaps a Death Eater. The Dark Lord, as we know from the example of the sirens, has the power to break a species’ web, and I doubt that would be good news for any of us.

Several other wizarding communities, particularly in Russia and France, are growing interested in you, Harry. They are accustomed to some wariness regarding British Lords in the last half century, of course; they knew that Voldemort did not intend to restrict his reign to his native land, if once he conquered it. And now that Dumbledore is in prison, and the Dark Lord returned, and a young Lord-level wizard just revealed as the Boy-Who-Lived and the Dark Lord’s mortal enemy without Declaring for the Light…their interest is natural, I think.
It is up to you what you wish to do about them. So far, not one of my cousins has reported a strong movement to offer assistance. They are mostly watching, cautious and curious, to see what will happen. Most of my cousins do not think they will join Voldemort; although the predominance of Light wizards in most international wizarding communities is not as pronounced as it is in Britain, they know what the consequences of serving him are. But they could serve as distractions if you try to dance with them when they insist on remaining neutral. You may be able to offer them profitable alliances, but I am not sure what will tempt them. Let me know if you do wish to initiate discussions with them, and I will pass the message on through my cousins.

Closer to home, several siren attacks have been reported. A school of them swam near the Isle and tried to attack our Muggles, but our wards repelled them. Two people have drowned in the Loch Ness in the last week, and the local wizards do not think it the work of their kelpie. There have also been several isolated deaths along the coastlines of both Britain and Ireland—easily attributable to carelessness in the water, but bearing the marks of siren attack.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling dizzy. He wondered if the sirens had broken free of Voldemort, or remained under his reign and were attacking on his orders. The pattern of random attacks might fit the attacks on the equinox, when Voldemort had simply wanted to take Muggles, without seeming to care about whom he captured.

He shook his head, opened his eyes, and went on reading.

Several of my British cousins, who have studied to relearn what they could of place and green magic, have reported unusual weather patterns in the places they have bound themselves to. Storms all over the Isles are growing fiercer. It has rained nonstop at my aunt Mawde’s home for the past five days, breaking through all her weather wards. She is not sure what this means, but she has gathered the report and sent it along with the others.

Harry frowned slightly. I did think that for the same storm to extend from London to Scotland on Friday was unusual. It hadn’t rained at Hogwarts on Saturday, but he did remember something about rain on Sunday, now that he thought of it, though he’d been too deeply involved in conversation with Draco to look outside.

He returned to Paton’s letter.

My family has contacts among the London werewolves, and reports them agitated, for two reasons. One: the Ministry is apparently preparing to push tougher anti-werewolf laws, including one that would require all lycanthropes to spend the nights of the full moon in Ministry custody, perhaps in Tullianum. Second: there are rumors of you as vates spreading, and the werewolves disagree on what they should do about it. Their animal sides have no love of you as many other species seem to do.

This is the most important news my family has gathered. In return, I have a personal request to make. I invite you to join my family on the Isle for New Year’s. I am aware that you will most likely spend Christmas in the care of your own loved ones, but I would like you to enjoy one celebration with the Opallines, and other than Christmas, this is the closest holiday.

That is not the only reason, of course. Calibrid, my daughter and heir, would like to meet you. Circumstances forbade her from attending the trial; she spent the past year traveling to learn the politics and customs of Europe, and now must remain bound to the Isle for a year to renew her acquaintance with it. As well, my son Doncan, similarly bound, looks forward to meeting with you. I think you will like him.

Please write back soon. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours in the grace of the Light,

Paton Opalline.

Harry leaned back on the couch and stared at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. One thing was clear: There was no way that he could handle all this by himself, as much as he would have liked to.

He closed his eyes and drew up a parchment in his mind, carefully placing concerns on it.

It doesn’t sound like I can do anything about the Veela as yet. Same thing with the storms, except keep an eye on them, and ask Paton to report anything else unusual about them to me. I don’t have any idea about weather magic, and Merlin knows what would happen if I asked Trelawney to read the patterns to me.

The giants...damn. Send someone to negotiate with them? Who? Hagrid? I don’t know if I have the right to ask that of him. Harry gnawed his lip, then decided, I don’t have the right, no, but I can ask him, and see what he says about it.
The werewolves are a problem, especially since the only contact I might have among them is Wilmot, and I think a letter from me to him would probably raise a few eyebrows. I remember Remus mentioning that he knows some of them, though, a long time ago. I’ll ask him if he’ll serve as my delegate.

I have got to get in contact with whatever the closest wizarding community is to Durmstrang. I’ll write to Charles, and I’ll ask Paton to put me in touch with whichever one of his cousins can most help me there. For the others, I’ll wait until they actually approach me. And if they’re just interested in watching, I’ll make sure I put on a bloody good show. Harry could feel himself grin briefly.

Now, the sirens. Stupid things. It does seem random so far, and I don’t know how to predict where they’ll strike next. Siren schools are the next subject of study for me, then. And I’ll write Arabella Zabini. If anyone knows a way of counteracting musical threats, then she will.

Harry sat up, and began writing. He detailed all his decisions in his letter to Paton, including his decision to accept their New Year’s invitation. The moment he finished and sealed that letter, the gull snatched it in its beak, gave a bright, piping cry, and flew towards the door of the Slytherin common room, again just as it opened to let someone else out to breakfast. Harry shook his head.

They must have a magic of their own.

His letters to Charles and Arabella followed. Harry didn’t see a way or a reason to dance around the problems delicately, so he told them the blunt truth. He was hungry by the time he finished writing, but he still had two more letters that had arrived during the weekend left. He reached for them gamely.

The first was, luckily, only a short note from Lucius.

Dear Harry:

Please be advised that the Dark Lord has a new Death Eater. Her name is Indigena Yaxley, of a family that values honor more than sense, and who is now serving because her nephew served my old Lord and betrayed him. She is incredibly good with plants, a powerful Dark witch, very clever, and determined to be neutral in the War until this occurred. Think of her as a sane and more dangerous Bellatrix. This means that you must be even more on your guard when you go to face our common enemy. Do not, I repeat do not, trust anyone you do not know who approaches you with an offer of alliance. We know that Indigena can disguise herself well enough to fool most wizards, though not how or what she looks like in the disguise.

We will have to find something else to call the Alliance, now that you have rejected your last name. Do think on it.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry rolled his eyes, but penned a short note back, to say that he’d received the warning and was grateful for it. He remembered studying the family Yaxley, though not in depth; they hadn’t participated in any wars of Dark and Light for nearly a century, preferring to stay in seclusion and study the Dark Arts. Vita desinit, decus permanit, ran their motto. Poetically translated, it meant Life ends, honor does not.

Harry could see why Indigena Yaxley would be a problem.

The last letter was from Augustus Starrise, a diplomatically worded note that suggested informing his fellow alliance members of his new allegiance as soon as possible. Harry had to agree with that. He didn’t have the time or energy to write any more letters right now, though. His head was spinning with complications, and he had five letters to post.

He scooped up those five, and made for the Owlery, running over possible wordings for his appeals to Remus and Hagrid in his head. Remus would normally be happy to help him, he knew, but the secrets of his fellow werewolves weren’t ones he had willingly revealed to Harry so far. And Harry had never had the close friendship with Hagrid that Connor had enjoyed.

More to the point, I’m not Dumbledore. And Hagrid had been loyal to Dumbledore.

Harry rubbed distractedly at his head, stopping only as he heard the crinkle of parchment and realized he would crush his post if the rubbing continued. Sometimes I wish I had never gone into politics, he thought, and decided to ignore all the factors in his life that would have made politics go after him.

Harry was so involved in plotting what he was going to do about Durmstrang—not only the Rosier-Henlin children were there,
but Gregory Goyle, assuming that the rumors last year were true and his father had sent him to Durmstrang instead of letting him come back to Hogwarts—that he didn’t notice the stares at first. Therefore, it was disconcerting to look up and find himself the focus of most of the eyes in the Great Hall.

Harry returned their gazes for a moment, then snorted. *Of course. Most of them haven’t seen me since the trial, with the way I buried myself away this weekend. This is the first public appearance I’ve made as the Boy-Who-Lived and Renounced His Name and Got His Parents Put In Prison.*

He took his seat at the Slytherin table, ignoring the stares as best he could. It wasn’t as though he didn’t have other things to worry about. Among the other things, he’d discovered a storm raging when he went up to the Owlery, blasting, lashing rain descending on the stones so hard that Harry was reluctant to send the birds out until they hooted their readiness to fly at him. Such a storm wouldn’t have made him do anything other than blink normally, but with storms all over the British Isles…

*Could Voldemort be altering the weather patterns? I have no idea why, though. It would make it more inconvenient for his Death Eaters than anyone else, since they’re the ones who have to meet outdoors more often.*

Or perhaps the storms were actually incidental. Harry was sure he had read something once before about the weather changing as a result of powerful magic. But the magic would have to be *so* powerful that only a Lord could raise it.

He reached automatically for porridge, and a hand covered his. He glanced at Draco and raised his eyebrows.

“Have you forgotten the talk we had yesterday?” Draco asked.

Harry frowned. He had, actually. He’d told Draco most of what Vera had said, and Draco had insisted that he try sweeter and more savory things than porridge to, as Draco put it, “recover his sense of taste.”

Harry still thought the whole thing immensely silly, the silliest of Vera’s prescriptions to him. Yes, he could see the necessity of learning to accept himself as human; after the much-improved conversations he’d had with Draco on Saturday and Sunday, he was impatient to push himself some more on it. And yes, he could see the necessity of relearning the pleasures of touch and sleep. But why should caring about what he ate make such a difference?

He had made the mistake of telling Draco about it, though, so under his stern eyes, he was forced to load his plate with eggs, sausages, and a roll. Draco just barely approved the pumpkin juice, saying that he thought orange juice would be better, and refused to let Harry have any corn flakes.

“I don’t need *this* level of fussing,” Harry said under his breath as he took a bite of his eggs. He chewed them, then shrugged at Draco’s stare. He didn’t dislike them, exactly, but they had texture and salt, and that made him feel uncomfortable. He didn’t see why he couldn’t have porridge.

“Sometimes, you do,” said Draco softly.

“You’re not my mum,” Harry pointed out. “Or my brother.”

“I would say that I’m *definitely* not either of those things,” said Draco, his eyes brightening, and Harry realized he shouldn’t have given him the opening. “Considering what we were doing yesterday, I would be most disturbed to wake up and find myself related to you in any way.”

Harry flushed and returned to his breakfast. If it would get Draco to stop reminding him of things better kept in private, then he’d eat the damn eggs.

“Potter.”

Harry deliberately didn’t turn around. The person behind him coughed and leaned forward to say, “Potter!” right into his ear.

“That’s not my name anymore, Smith,” Harry pointed out absenty, biting into a sausage. He winced at the flavor. “Besides, since when are we on such formal terms? We’re allies, I’d thought.”

That was perhaps the only time that Harry remembered being able to render Zacharias Smith speechless. It didn’t last very long. Zacharias coughed and tried again a moment later. “Harry,” he said, and Harry was glad to put his fork down and turn around.

“Yes?”
Zacharias stood up haughtily straight, looking as if he refrained from rolling his eyes only because it was something no Smith would do. “I just want to ask you a few questions about what this means,” he said, tapping the *Daily Prophet* article that Harry refused to look at.

“All right,” Harry agreed.

“You’re not the heir of your family?” Zacharias stared straight into his eyes.

“No.” Harry rolled his head back on his neck and smiled at him. “Does that disappoint you?”

“A bit,” Zacharias said. “You’re elder son, correct? I thought the Potter inheritance would pass to you, with your father in his—current condition.” Harry wondered if Light pureblood manners forbade referring to the loss of someone’s magic. It wasn’t a custom he’d ever heard of.

“I renounced my name before then,” said Harry quietly. “It went to my brother because it had nowhere else to go.”

“Ah.” Zacharias hesitated a moment, as though he now regretted doing this in the middle of the Great Hall. Harry didn’t. It would answer some questions so he wouldn’t have to answer them multiple times over, and it kept him from having to eat. Draco couldn’t complain, and had better not poke him with the fork that Harry could see him picking up from the corner of his eye.

Zacharias recovered himself, though, and said, with a smooth, cold, stern face, “What family name do you plan to adopt?”

Definitely glad that we did this here. Harry raised his voice for his answer. “I’m Harry for right now, and that’s all I want to be. I’ll never renounce my kinship with my brother, who’s keeping his name, but I’m not accepting the Potter name again. Nor do I have any plans for adoption into any family, currently. And I like it that way.” A slow turn of his head had him meeting multiple speculative eyes, and he sighed. *I suppose that won’t stop all the offers. Each of them is going to think they’re the family that can persuade me otherwise, and they’ll think me vulnerable without relatives until they tangle with me. At least it might be on the level of words, as this confrontation is, and not shouted hexes, which ought to improve my relationship with Ravenclaw.*

“You don’t know how glad we would be to take you,” said Draco, quietly enough that Zacharias probably didn’t even hear.

Harry turned his head and gripped his hand. “I know,” he said quietly. “But I want to be just Harry right now.”

Draco didn’t answer, but squeezed his hand back, some of the sulky look fading from his face. And he put down the fork.

Zacharias seemed to be suitably impressed with this show of strength. He nodded. “Then I’ll simply reswear my alliance to Harry the vates instead of Harry Potter,” he said. “Will that be acceptable?”

“It will,” said Harry, and his erstwhile ally left him. Harry hopefully cast a *Tempus* charm to check the minutes left in breakfast, and brightened when he saw there were only five minutes left before they had to leave anyway. He started to stand.

Draco clamped a hand on his arm. “Sit down,” he breathed. “You didn’t get enough to eat.”

“I had all I want,” said Harry.

Draco looked into his eyes, obviously asking him if he *really* wanted to have an argument this stupid in front of everyone.

Harry resignedly sat down and ate a few more sausages to make Draco happy, trying to ignore Millicent’s snickering.

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“Remus?”

Remus looked up, surprised. He had thought that Harry had Charms at this hour. “Is everything all right, Harry?” he asked, setting down the letter from Wilmot he’d been looking at. Wilmot had bragged about revealing himself to Harry. Remus wasn’t sure that was the wisest thing to do—not because Harry would betray a secret like that, but because it might put Harry in an awkward position with the Minister. The situation was giving him a headache, and he was happy to focus on another problem. At least Harry didn’t smell particularly distressed.

Harry grinned at him and leaned against the door. “Sure, Remus. But I can already do the Silencing Charms we’re covering
perfectly well, after all. And Professor Flitwick doesn’t know what to call me. He finally settled on Mr. Harry, but he still doesn’t like it.” Harry chuckled. “So he said I could come see you.”

Remus lifted his eyebrows. “And what do you need to see me about?”

Harry pulled a letter out of his pocket and levitated it over to him. Remus accepted it without thought, then shook his head a bit. Sometimes he found himself forgetting that Harry had ever had two hands, so well did he compensate with his magic. It was—well, disturbing. Remus wasn’t sure why it should be disturbing, though, so he focused on the letter, blinking as a certain paragraph flashed green. Remus’s eyes caught the words London werewolves, and he leaned close.

“I know about Wilmot,” said Harry quietly as he read. “He revealed himself to me during the trial. And he said that he had contacts among the London werewolves. I’m afraid that owlimg him might reveal him, though. My post is going to be tracked if at all possible, and a random Auror writing me would set off bells I don’t want ringing. Would you be willing to talk to the London werewolves for me?”

Remus took his time to raise his head. Old loyalties were tugging him in two directions now. At least he’d been to the Sanctuary, and was sure that he could handle the conflict now. In the old days, this might have tugged him apart.

On the one hand, Harry was the only member of his family, besides Connor, for whom Remus had any love left now. And he’d known Harry since he was a child, and he knew him now as vates. He couldn’t see Harry doing something that would hurt the refugee packs on purpose.

On the other hand, some of the London refugees had specifically requested that no human know about them. They kept an eye on dealings in the wizarding and Muggle worlds that might affect them, of course, but as quietly as possible, mostly through werewolves like Remus who hadn’t joined a pack. Even a vates wouldn’t be welcome among them without a wolf snarling in his head. And they had helped Remus during the summers when he was a student in Hogwarts, and during the years between the time he left Hogwarts and the first fall of Voldemort, and again during the time before Connor and Harry came to school, giving him money, shelter, protection, when he couldn’t hold a job. Betrayal would be a poor return for all they had done for him.

“What do you want me to say?” Remus asked, deciding to temporize. Harry, at least, unlike some humans, would understand if Remus refused to do this.

“That I’m going to try as hard as I can to make sure those anti-werewolf laws aren’t passed.” Harry’s eyes flashed. For a moment, Remus was carried painfully back in time to his sixth year, when Lily’s eyes had flashed like that at James. Then it was past, and he was looking at a boy more determined than Lily had ever been about anything. “It’s time Scrimgeour and I talked about that. And if someone wants Wolfsbane, they can approach me through you or Hawthorn or one of the Light werewolves I can safely communicate with. Delilah Gloryflower would probably be best, since her aunt is my ally, too.”

Remus leaned back in his chair. “You’d just provide the Wolfsbane for free?”

Harry frowned at him. “Of course.”

Remus pondered for a moment, then decided he had to reveal this, or some of his words wouldn’t make any sense to Harry. “Some of them would actually prefer if you charged for it, Harry. Without a price, they’re likely to think it’s poison, or a trap.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I can see that. But then some who need it might not get it.”

Remus smiled in spite of himself. “Worry about the ones willing to approach you, first,” he said.

“And then you’ll pass the message along?” Harry’s eyes widened, and he smiled brilliantly when Remus nodded. “Thank you. That’s really all that I wanted them to know. If they want to tell me anything, I’d appreciate it, but it’s up to them.”

Did his training make him a diplomat, or did he just turn out that way? Remus asked himself, as he watched Harry slip out the door. This open-ended approach was the one that would work best with the London packs, many of whom were as wary of wizards as true wolves were of Muggles. It’d take a lot of circling and sniffing even so before they could bring themselves to trust Harry—well, except with Loki’s pack, but Loki was something like a Weasley twin, and Remus wouldn’t trust the immediate offer he would be sure to make.

And there was the chance, however small and distant and far in the future it might be, that this would someday lead to freedom from their wolves.
Remus’s wolf snarled in his head, demanding blood. Remus grinned fiercely to spite it, and then rose to begin writing his letters.

*

Harry peered out a window on the fifth floor at the steadily falling rain, and felt his shoulders relax, despite the storm’s unnaturalness. The day had gone well so far. No one had been stupid enough to approach him with offers of adoption—yet—Remus had agreed to contact the London werewolves, Hagrid had hesitated but said he’d think about talking to the giants, Draco had been satisfied with the sandwiches Harry had eaten at lunch, and Harry had finished writing the letters that would inform his allies of Augustus Starrise’s new place among them. He couldn’t help grinning as he imagined Lucius’s reaction. Yes, Draco’s father probably knew about Augustus already, but assuming he didn’t…

“Harry. There you are.”

Harry jumped, turning around as he did so. Acies Lestrange stood behind him, her hood over her face as it usually was outside class. Harry relaxed and inclined his head. “Professor Merryweather,” he said, just in case someone was around to overhear them. “Did you need something?”

“I need to tell you something,” said Acies. “I have known about it for several months, but you were not yet ready to hear it. Other songs have ridden your mind. Now you may hear this prophecy’s music.”

Harry felt his shoulders tense, most of his good mood vanishing. Not another fucking prophecy. “I suppose there’s no chance that it doesn’t concern me?” he asked.

Acies gave him just enough of a look from under her cloak to intimidate him, then began to half-sing, half-chant.

“Three on three the old one coils,
Three in its times, three in its choices,
It bears his rivals to silence and stillness,
And the wild Darkness laughs, and the Light rejoices.

“Two on two the storms that are coming,
Two for the day, and two for the year,
The storm of darkness when no moon will shine,
And the storm of light that will blaze most fiercely here.

“One on one all the prophecies bear down,
One is their center, and one is their heart,
And from my mouth comes no Divination again
Except those prophecies in which he has a part.”

Harry blinked, his mind emptying for a moment, the way that it had when he finally heard the full prophecy that concerned him and Connor for the first time. Then he found his eyes turning to the rain outside the window first. It showed absolutely no signs of stopping, and the thunder screamed like something with its guts ripped out to make the point.

“Two on two the storms that are coming,” he whispered.

“Yes.” Acies moved up beside him, one hand touching his shoulder. Harry blinked and glanced at it. It was an ordinary hand, but for a moment, it had felt incredibly heavy, weighted and scaled, a dragon’s talon. “I think these storms the prelude of them, though, rather than the storms that the prophecy means. But there is something I fear, something I fear very much. Did you know, vates, that on the night of the midwinter solstice, the moon will be dark?”

Harry closed his eyes. Shit. That’s a prime day for one of Voldemort’s attacks, and if the moon is dark and all influence of Light is banished… He didn’t know for certain what Voldemort might do, but something strong enough to influence a prophecy wouldn’t be pleasant.

“Thank you, Acies,” he said. Then his mind leaped again, reciting the eighth line of the prophecy to him, and his eyes flared open. “And the storm of light is coming to Hogwarts?”

“So the prophecy says,” said Acies calmly, stepping away from him. “Sybill Trelawney stood on the Astronomy Tower when she made it, and it sounds like a local reference, does it not?”
Harry nodded, his mind spinning rapidly, investigating several conclusions and disregarding most of them, pinpointing the one most likely.

_A storm of darkness on Midwinter. A storm of light on Midsummer. And on Midsummer, it’ll be a year since Voldemort’s resurrection._

He took a deep breath, and expelled it again. A ringing had appeared in his head, but he didn’t think it was anything to worry about. This was the kind of ringing that he usually got just before he confronted a worthy opponent, or did something that mattered to the war he’d been training for all his life.

“Thank you, Acies,” he said, starting to move away, but paused when she remained where she was, staring out the window. “Are you well?” he asked gently.

“I hear the music,” Acies whispered. “Dragons are called the Singers, I have told you that.”

Harry nodded.

Acies turned her head to look at him, though again it was only a quick flash of wild eyes before she slid her hood back over her face. “I am still mostly human, Harry,” she said. “But only mostly. The dragon in me hears the music and sings back to it. And every time I use the dragon, I yield more of the human. If I am ever close enough to the great songs, however, the songs of Dark and Light, I fear that I will not be able to help myself, and my dragon will come.”

Harry hesitated, unsure what to say. Acies was staring out the window at the rain again.

“Is there anything I can do?” Harry asked at last. “As vates, I mean?”

“You cannot free me from freedom,” Acies said gently. “Be on your way, Harry, and be well. Only remember me as human, when there is nothing human left of me.”

Harry bowed his head, feeling no fear, only sadness and a great awe, and left her there, staring as the rain continued to fall and the thunder screamed its anger and its death.

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Chapter Forty-Nine: Ariadne’s Web

Harry woke at a note of phoenix song. He sat up, pushing his hand sleepily at his eyes, trying to wake up faster than seemed to be happening. If Fawkes sang to him in the middle of the night, and not to put him to sleep, then it must be serious.

But the song wasn’t coming from Fawkes, he found when he opened his eyes fully and saw the phoenix sitting on the far end of his bed. It soared from just above his left wrist, and a moment later Charles Rosier-Henlin’s voice said, “Harry? Can you hear me?”

Harry bowed his head and suppressed a groan. _Of course._ The spell Charles had taught him to communicate over long distances, the spell that he and his allies had used in the Woodhouse attack! He could have used this to speak with Charles right away about Durmstrang, if only he had remembered it.

“Sir,” he said. “What can I help you with?”

There was a pause, as if that wasn’t the greeting Charles had expected, but he went on with no discernible change of tone. “I assume that you know about Durmstrang now.”

“Yes, but almost nothing about it,” said Harry honestly. It was the reason why he hadn’t felt able to do anything about the other school as yet. A few subtle questions among students who had relatives at Durmstrang had produced shaking heads and blank looks. Harry couldn’t plan an attack when he had no information.

“You could have spoken to me.”

Harry felt his face burn. “Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry. I forgot.”

“Did you also forget that I use this spell to communicate with my sons?” Charles asked. “I know what has been happening inside
“I did forget, but I would be grateful if you would tell me,” said Harry, his mind springing into action. “What can I do? Is there a way of bringing down the lightning ward that they have the school surrounded with, or—”

“The answer, Harry, is nothing. We can do nothing. Right now.”

The bitterness silenced Harry. He waited a moment until he was sure that nothing else would emerge from the air above his wrist, and then he asked cautiously, “Why? Is Voldemort Marking the students as Death Eaters?”

“That abomination, at least, is beyond his reach, unless he changes the magic of the Dark Mark,” said Charles. “He cannot take anyone unwilling. It was a protection he devised during the First War so that he would know who was loyal to him. He didn’t think that someone would turn traitor to him after they had the Mark, or take it for any other reason than serving him.” His voice was vicious with satisfaction, before it went back to the dry tone that Harry thought meant he was extremely angry. “No, he is holding the children as hostages. I have received a polite little letter, informing me that I will not fight beside you anymore. Or else. Mr. Rhangnara has received a similar letter.”

Harry’s head was light, spinning. *This happened, and I wasn’t able to prevent it. This happened, and I let it happen.* He crushed the guilt, because it would have prevented him from speaking. “I didn’t know that Mr. Rhangnara’s children were at Durmstrang,” he said instead. He had assumed without thinking that they were schooled privately, since Thomas was obviously a wizard interested in books and learning.

“They are,” said Charles. “And his daughter Charis has taken the *Crucio*—” There was a sudden silence, as if he hadn’t meant to tell Harry that. He probably hadn’t, Harry thought.

“How old is Charis?” Harry asked.

“How old?” Harry stared at the far wall. He could always speak to Thomas with this spell and ask him. He probably couldn’t owl him, since Voldemort would be watching for some sign of communication between Harry and the allies who were being pressured to withdraw from him. And what had the owl to Charles yesterday cost his sons?

“Twelve,” said Charles. “She is twelve.”

Harry closed his eyes.

“And my son Owen took it, and he is sixteen,” Charles went on, in a harsh rush, as if determined to get all the bad news out of the way at once. “Voldemort sent in Bellatrix Lestrange, Harry.”

“Is he mad?” Harry murmured, then realized he knew the answer to that question. He changed it. “Does he really think that she’ll be able to control her urge to curse all the children in sight?”

“Apparently so,” said Charles, once again dryly. “Or perhaps not. Considering the spell he has used on the school, absolute loyalty may mean more to him than the actual good condition of the hostages.”

“You still haven’t told me what that spell is,” Harry said, opening his eyes and frowning at nothing. “Or why it’s impossible for me to go to Durmstrang with you and rip that lightning ward apart.”

“Have you ever heard of Ariadne’s Web?”

“I know who Ariadne was, of course,” said Harry. “She let Theseus into the center of the Labyrinth to kill the Minotaur by giving him a clew of thread that would show him the way in and then the way out. But perhaps we’re not speaking of the same one—”

“We are. Ariadne’s Web is, according to wizarding legend, what Ariadne did to Theseus and all those in his palace after he deserted her. It binds everyone in a particular enclosed place from using magic against the caster. It’s a strange spell. The web is absolutely impossible to break from inside it—there is no way that the students could take on Lestrange and win, no matter how many of them tried. But from the outside, in this case Durmstrang’s walls, it seems to be linked to a single object that the caster carries. If we could make her put that object down, then we would have a chance of fighting her.”

“Thus the lightning ward,” Harry summarized. “But, sir, I do have the power to break a ward like that, and I am vates. Destroying Durmstrang.”
Webs is what I do.” The very thought of Ariadne’s Web was making him sick with the need to destroy it. “We could still go to Durmstrang and—”

“There exists another effect of Ariadne’s Web,” said Charles quietly. “The caster can will anyone in it to suffer pain or to die instantly. There is no stopping that, from either inside or outside, unless the web itself is broken. Lestrange has announced to the children that the minute she feels the wards fall, she will begin lashing out through the web, hurting anyone in sight.”

Harry closed his eyes. “And certainly my allies’ children would be among her first targets,” he muttered.

“Precisely.”

“So what can we do?” Harry whispered. He felt helpless—not necessarily against what had happened, but against the extent of Voldemort’s cruelty. He had not thought to guard against a spell like this because he had not dreamed that it existed, much less that Voldemort would use it.

“Portkeys and Apparition no longer work onto school grounds,” said Charles. “And the Floo Network to Durmstrang has been sealed off. But a Portkey into the school itself would work, to get us around the wards without having to drop them. They are, of course, only available to someone trusted. That means—”

“A Death Eater,” Harry finished. “We need a Death Eater.”

“Yes. I don’t suppose you know one?” Charles’s voice got dryer.

Harry’s mind went at once to Evan Rosier, but he had to say, “No. Not one that I could trust to give me accurate information, or a Portkey that actually worked to take us to Durmstrang.”

“I thought not. I am working, subtly, on contacts that I had in the First War, when I gave the Dark Lord monetary support. It will be a long, slow process, to get through to people who can help me disrupt his plans so thoroughly as this, and to convince them to take the risk in the first place. In the meantime, I’ve told my boys to keep their heads down, and avoid Lestrange’s notice as much as possible. Rhangnara has passed the same message along to his children.”

“And there is nothing else that can be done?” There has to be, Harry thought, but he realized that was probably his experience as vates talking. From the time he had learned of a web until the time he broke it, he had never encountered one he thought could not be broken—only the consequences of what might happen if he unraveled it too early. The idea that he would have to wait in silence and patience while people who had trusted their lives to him suffered was intolerable.

“Nothing, Harry,” said Charles quietly. “I am sorry. I have spoken with my sons exhaustively. The spell is undoubtedly Ariadne’s Web, and I have been through both my library and Rhangnara’s, which is much more extensive. The web cannot be broken from the inside, and they have restricted all access thoroughly from the outside.”

“I am sorry,” Harry whispered. “So sorry, that following me has brought you into this.” He shuddered at the thought of living in the same school with Bellatrix, never knowing when she might make you suffer pain or even death, instantaneously and at her whim.

“I knew something like this might happen,” said Charles, sounding calmer than he had so far. “But they still should not have touched my children, and for that they will suffer.” His voice was like dry ice. “I will not owl you, and neither will Mr. Rhangnara, now. We must be seen complying with the terms that the Dark Lord has dictated to us. But we will use this spell to speak to you, and if we find some other method to get around the Web and into the school, we will let you know at once.”

“I don’t suppose brooms would—”

“No. The lightning ward has the school surrounded, Mr. Pot—Harry. You would still have to try and drop the ward as you rode above Durmstrang, and Lestrange would know at once.”

Harry gave a little snarl. He hated feeling helpless. But until he could think of a better solution, this one would have to do. Perhaps he could send an owl to Rosier, though he hadn’t heard from the man in long enough for the silence to make him wary.

“Very well,” he murmured. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You are welcome.”
Charles’s voice ceased, and Harry was left to sit on his bed, in the dark. There was no chance of going back to sleep—and, he decided abruptly, he didn’t want to sit on his bed in the dark either. He opened his curtains and peered cautiously at the other boys’ beds. The sound of Draco’s light snores came from beside him, accompanied by Blaise’s slightly deeper ones, and Harry nodded. Though neither of them slept anything like as heavily as Connor, they were still in the phase of sleep where they were least likely to hear him if he crept out.

He wasn’t sure where he was going as he went down the stairs and crossed the common room velvet-footed. Going outside the school to fly would be too dangerous. He only knew that he wanted to do something, since he couldn’t do what he really wanted: fly to Durmstrang, take down the ward, and rescue everyone.

He stepped out into the dungeons, shut the door to the common room behind him, and leaned his head against the cool stone. He thought he could hear the sound of rushing water if he listened intently enough. That might only be in his head, but it comforted him nonetheless. He didn’t know how long he stood there, letting his hand stroke the stone and trying to think of nothing at all.

“Harry. Is there a reason that you are filling your hair with slime and your palm with blood?”

Harry started and looked up. Snape stood not far behind him, his wand held out in front of him with a faint Lumos on the end of it and his eyebrows raised. Harry glanced down then, as a stinging pain in his hand made itself known, and realized that he’d ground his palm so hard into the stone that it had a gash on it. He grimaced.

“I had bad news,” he said softly, then could have struck himself. He didn’t want to talk about this with Snape.

Snape studied him intently, then said, “Come with me, Harry. We will not disturb Madam Pomfrey this time of night.”

Harry knew he could have argued, could have resisted, but he really didn’t want to go back to bed, the only other possible option. Anyone’s company was to be preferred to his own right about then. He followed Snape to his private rooms—which slightly surprised Harry; he had thought they’d go to his offices—and took his seat on the couch near the fire. Snape ducked briefly towards the shelf along the wall where he kept his personal potions, then came back with two of them. Harry accepted one that smelled of a normal healing draught, but shook his head at the other. “I don’t need to be calm,” he said.

“Don’t you?”

Harry squinted at Snape. He didn’t sound the way he—well, should have sounded. He sounded interested, and as if he thought there was at least a reasonable chance that Harry might not need the Calming Draught. Harry would have expected Snape to force it down his throat, instead.

And that made Harry hesitate. It’s my choice. He eyed the blue liquid, then sighed. Do I have a chance of getting back to sleep if I don’t take this? No. Do I need the sleep? Yes.

He drank down the vial, and was briefly gratified to see Snape’s eyes widen before the potion spread serenity across the surface of his mind. He sighed again and gave Snape back the empty vials, then leaned back and closed his eyes. The pain in his palm had already stopped, and Harry knew the wound would have closed.

“Do you wish to speak about what is troubling you?”

Snape’s voice was low and careful. Harry listened, his senses sharpened now that he didn’t have to worry about emotions clouding them, and found no trace of impatience. Snape wasn’t trying to force him to do this any more than he had been trying to force him to take the Calming Draught. It was—unexpected.

And, given his free choice, Harry decided to answer. “It’s Durmstrang,” he murmured. “Charles just spoke to me and told me that I can’t do anything about it. Bellatrix Lestrange is in the school, with Ariadne’s Web on the children, and a ward around her that she’ll know the instant I try to take down. Then she can hurt or kill the people I’m trying to save.” He felt a wave of tension run through his muscles, despite the Calming Draught. “Why? Why can’t I do anything?”

“Should you have been able to do something?” Snape asked.

Harry opened his eyes. “Of course I should have. What kind of question is that?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a strange question for you to ask, that’s why.”
He thought Snape smiled. “I did not mean what was strange about my question. I meant, why should you have been able to do something?”

“Oh.” Harry frowned. “Because I’m the only wizard who stands a chance of matching Voldemort in power, now—unless we really want to free Dumbledore and ask him to pretty please help us.” He snorted. “I should be able to do something about the ward and the Ariadne’s Web.”

“And did you know that the Dark Lord was going to do this?”

“No,” said Harry reluctantly. He frowned at Snape. “You’re going to make me see sense or something, aren’t you?”

“If I can.” Snape’s face was neutral. “You seem to be feeling helpless, Harry, but there is no reason for that. You did not cause this.”

“But I should have anticipated it.” Harry moved restlessly; he couldn’t tell if the Calming Draught was wearing off or if his emotions were simply too strong for the potion to contain them all. “I would have known immediately if I hadn’t been paying so much attention to my own affairs, the trial. And then that weekend where I didn’t look at letters! Paton’s letter telling me about Durmstrang’s silence came on Saturday. If I’d looked at it—”

“You would have known about your own helplessness earlier,” Snape finished. “That is all.”

“Maybe I could think of something.” said Harry. “There has to be some way to get through the ward and the web.”

“Sometimes, Harry, there is not,” said Snape softly.

Harry frowned at him. “But you’ve always found a way. You’ve never been helpless in your life. It’s one of the things I admire about you, you know.” Something very odd flickered across Snape’s face, but Harry didn’t think he could identify it, so he didn’t try. “You found a way out of just being a Death Eater, and you found a way out of serving Dumbledore when you saw he wasn’t worth serving, and you found a way to rescue me when you shouldn’t have been able to. You even found a way to get my parents punished.” This time, he couldn’t help the slight accusing tone to his voice. “When you should have just left things alone.”

“Harry,” said Snape, voice low, intense. “I was helpless in most of those situations, and took the only road open to me.”

“But that’s just the thing,” said Harry, flinging up his hand. “There’s no road open in this situation that I can see.”

“And there was no road open in the situation with your parents that did not cost me something I held dear,” said Snape. “Please understand that, Harry. I did not accuse them to hurt you. I did not accuse them to hurt James. The cost of accusing them was your good opinion of me. The cost of leaving them free was your soul.”

“It wouldn’t have been,” Harry muttered, closing his eyes.

“It would,” said Snape. “You would have driven yourself to death trying to rescue them, and it was impossible to rescue them. You saw that yourself at the trial.” Abruptly, he drew in his breath, and was still. Then he murmured, “You must weigh the costs of acting against not acting at this juncture. What are the costs of not acting?”


“And if you act?”

“Lives, potentially,” Harry had to answer again. “My allies’ good opinion of me. The feeling that I’ve endangered the children at Durmstrang through my own actions, instead of just letting something happen to them.”

“So it all swings on your own feelings,” Snape said. “And are your own emotions enough reason to do something difficult and dangerous, something that might endanger the children inside Durmstrang because of you?”

Harry made a small sound of distress. He didn’t think he could open his eyes. The Calming Draught was drowning his mind deep. But if he didn’t deal with the problem now, then it would just overwhelm him when he woke up. “No,” he whispered. “They can’t be. They aren’t. I just—I just wish there was something I could do.”

“Research Ariadne’s Web,” said Snape. “Research wards. If you find something that might mean nothing to anyone else,
something only possible for a wizard of your power, then you can launch yourself at it. Until then, there really is nothing else that you can do.”

“Maybe not,” said Harry. He felt himself lying back on the couch. Snape was beside him in a moment, with a soft swish of robes, arranging him so that he lay back and removing his glasses. Harry managed to peer at him blearily, though he didn’t think he could focus his eyes. “Did you really do it because of that?”

Snape looked down at him. “Because of what?”

“You didn’t accuse my parents because you hated James,” Harry clarified. “You did it to save me.”

Snape stiffened in surprise. Then he said, after a moment as full of life as a heartbeat, “Yes, I did.”

“Oh.” Harry closed his eyes. “Wasn’t sure about that,” he muttered. He felt a hand smooth over his forehead, lingering on his scar, but sleep was already claiming him, full of dreams that wouldn’t eat him alive.

* 

“Mr. Potter?”

Harry knew it was probably childish, but he kept his head bowed over his book. Ariadne’s Web is sometimes considered to be a myth, the text told him, but it is most assuredly a real spell. There are myths about it that have hindered researchers into it for centuries, however. The most persistent of these is the idea that it can be cast only by a woman, as it was a witch’s vengeance on a man who forsook her. This is not true, though it is true that the web is stronger when cast by a witch...

“Mr. Potter. Please.”

The speaker had stepped around in front of him. Harry was vaguely surprised to see that it was a stranger—a rabbity wizard with what seemed to be a permanently apologetic look on his face, clutching a small sheaf of papers. He held out a hand when he saw Harry’s stare, flushing.

“My name is Adam Proudfoot,” he murmured. “I was Mr. Potter’s—that is to say, your father’s solicitor. I’ve come to see you and your brother about the settlement of the properties and the Potter inheritance.”

Harry didn’t take his hand. “Then you want to talk to my brother,” he said, turning back to his book. “He’s the one who inherited everything.”

“Harry.”

Harry looked over his shoulder reluctantly. Connor stood in the library entrance, frowning at him, and ignoring Madam Pince, who was giving them a glare of death for interrupting the silence.

“There are things we need to discuss,” said Connor. “I want to make sure that you have some of the money, for example—“

“And I don’t want it,” Harry cut in.

“Mr. Potter”— twittered Mr. Proudfoot, who obviously didn’t get it.

“Brother.” Connor took a single step forward, his gaze stronger than Harry had seen it since that day in the courtroom. “I’ll need an heir, and I don’t have a chance of having one for a while yet. And I know things about the Potter properties that you don’t. They want an heir. They want to know that they’ll have somewhere to go if I die.”

“They can talk to you?” Harry asked, startled. That wasn’t something he’d heard about Lux Aeterna or the house at Godric’s Hollow, though of course he’d known Lux Aeterna had its own personality.

“Not talk,” said Connor, his forehead wrinkling. “It’s more like they have a hunger, and my mind translates the hunger for me.” He blinked, and his eyes focused on Harry again. “And I think you’re the best choice for someone to be heir. You don’t have to take the Potter name again, just take charge of the properties if I—if I die.” His voice faltered on the word, at least; Harry would have been worried if his brother had gone stoic about his own death all of a sudden. “They’ll accept you, since you have the blood connection.”
“Well put, Mr. Potter, well put,” said Mr. Proudfoot. When Harry looked at him again, he was cringing in front of Madam Pince’s scowl. “Should we take this somewhere more private?” he asked.

Harry stood up with a sigh. “There are abandoned classrooms we can use,” he said, and Mr. Proudfoot nodded gratefully. Harry waited until they were out of the library and safely sitting down behind dusty desks in one of the third-floor classrooms before he added, “I understand what you mean, Connor, but I don’t want them. I don’t want anything to do with the Potter name except your love and your friendship.”

“You won’t accept money even as a gift?” Connor asked, his voice wistful. “Mr. Proudfoot told me that all the Galleons in your personal vault have reverted to me. The commitment James made to give them to you couldn’t hold up against the loss of his magic, because his magic was bound to his signature.”

Harry nodded; he’d expected that. Many things changed when a pureblood wizard lost his magic. “I’m sure. Thank you, Connor, but they just have too many bad memories. I won’t be tied to James and Lily by anything except memories now. That’s the way I want it.”

Connor sighed. Mr. Proudfoot said, “Ah, Mr. Pot—Harry, but your father did leave something in trust for you, something sealed with a spell that the loss of his magic did not disrupt. Because the object is sentient, it could agree to the transfer, and its agreement was recorded again when your father lost his magic.”

“What is it?” Harry asked, though he had the feeling he already knew.


Harry had the feeling that the Maze belonged to itself as much as anyone, so he nodded. “That, I’ll accept,” he said.

Connor’s face brightened into a smug smile. “Does that mean that you’ll visit Lux Aeterna sometimes?”

Harry couldn’t help a smile of his own. “Yes, sometimes. I—" He paused abruptly, as something he’d learned in his visit to Silver-Mirror last weekend came back full force. “Connor,” he asked, his voice gentle. “Would you permit me to tie the Potter properties to you personally, instead of to the earth, as they are now?”

Connor’s face went blank with an obvious lack of comprehension. Mr. Proudfoot, though, gasped aloud. “Mr. Potter!” he scolded. “Er, Harry,” he added, when Harry shot him a look. “That is a custom followed by Dark wizarding families! Linchpins are linked to the earth they stand on, enduring in a way that Dark properties never can. Surely you cannot want your brother to be sole heir to the Potter properties, and in such a way that he must designate a sole heir? You do not want to be the one responsible for changing the very nature of his inheritance, do you?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” said Harry. “Linchpins are stakes in a web that ties the northern goblins down. I want to free them. I am vates.” His gaze went back to Connor’s face. “But he’s the one who must make the decision.”

Connor chewed his lip. Harry waited, fairly confident. He knew that, two years ago, Connor would have rejected this idea the moment he heard that it was used by Dark families. But they were not sitting in a room from two years ago, thank Merlin, and Connor knew now that Harry wouldn’t agree to accept anything but the Maze. His face slowly hardened, and then he nodded once.

“I’ll agree to that,” he said.

“Mr. Potter!” Mr. Proudfoot was obviously scandalized all over again. “It would entail your signing numerous forms, and speaking aloud a sacred, binding oath seven days from now, and creating a will that says you surrender your linchpin—”

“Oh,” Connor said, leaning forward like a lion leaping on a zebra, “so I would have to go through you, then? It isn’t something Harry could do after all?”

The color drained gradually from Mr. Proudfoot’s face. Harry found it wonderful to watch. The solicitor looked down at the table, hemmed, hawed, tapped his fingers for a moment, and then flung up his hands. “Yes, yes, it is,” he said.

“Wonderful.” Connor’s face brightened. “Then start filing the papers at once. And since seven days from now will be Saturday again, I can swear the oath with no trouble. Oh, and bring copies of the papers so that Harry can see he owns the Maze now.” He caught Harry’s eye, and added, “I want you to have them.”
“Fine,” Harry muttered.

Mr. Proudfoot made various woeful noises, but Connor refused to listen. He suggested several alternate courses, but Connor refused to take them. He attempted to persuade them that James, not to mention their Potter ancestors, wouldn’t have wanted it this way, but Connor stared at him, and Mr. Proudfoot flushed as slowly as he had paled, doubtless recalling that Connor had testified against his own father in front of the Wizengamot, and didn’t give two figs for what James wanted.

Harry was grinning as he stood. He had to get back to studying Ariadne’s Web, Merlin knew—five days of study so far hadn’t revealed anything he could use—but at least there was this mild triumph, of knowing that one linchpin would be removed from the northern goblins’ web. And it was two triumphs, if one counted Connor acting more like himself than a Potter heir.

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Harry swore softly and bent over the book, a new one on the history of Greek witches in general, and the webs they might have woven to control the sirens and various other magical creatures. Another week had ground by, and he hadn’t had any luck with the books specifically about Ariadne’s Web. Perhaps some detail about the weaving of other nets would give him a hint, however.

So far, everything he’d discovered indicated that Charles was right: surround an Ariadne’s Web with a powerful ward also linked to the caster of the Web, and there was absolutely no way to get inside without a Portkey. But Harry refused to accept that. He would find a way through it. At least Charles and Thomas so far hadn’t contacted him to say that one of their children was dead or further hurt, and Harry was sure they would have done that if it’d happened.

Thunder screamed abruptly, and Harry blinked. He was studying in one of the classrooms on the fifth floor, and he’d forgotten the storm for a time. Now, he did pay attention to it, narrowing his eyes to stare out through the glass. He didn’t envy Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, who were playing their Quidditch match today.

In fact, he didn’t envy anyone who had to be outside at the moment. The storms had come every other day at first, but it had been raining steadily since Wednesday. Snape had renewed the water-proofing spells on the dungeons, to make absolutely sure that they wouldn’t flood, and all Care of Magical Creatures classes were being held in the Great Hall. Harry had spoken to the Many through the small snake who still wrapped securely about his throat, but they reassured him that the creatures of the Forbidden Forest were doing well enough; they were much better able to cope with harsh weather than wizards, after all.

Harry shook his head. So many problems, and I still don’t know what Voldemort is doing to cause this level of disturbance in the weather.

He started to turn back to his book when a flourish of wings passed in front of his face. Harry started, and then saw a familiar gull hovering outside the window, beating at the glass desperately.

Harry Vanished the glass, let the gull fly inside, and then restored the window. He stared down at the dripping bird as she landed on the floor, looking half-waterlogged, and shivered absently in the flood of cold air that had entered with her. “Did you want something, Honoria?” he asked dryly. “You could have walked up to the school as a human, you know.”

Honoria transformed back. Harry suffered an unpleasant flashback for a moment—the position in which she lay on the floor wasn’t that far from the one in which she’d sprawled just after taking the Severing Curse for him in the Woodhouse battle—but she got up almost at once, and cast a warming charm on herself. She gave him a haughty look. “I found it b-bracing.” The chatter of her teeth ruined the effect somewhat, and her haughty look became sheepish. A moment later, her soaked hair and streaming face vanished behind the illusion of perfectly arranged features, and she took a chair across from him, proud as a queen.

Harry rolled his eyes. She probably made it worse flying around outside to make sure I wasn’t watching the Quidditch game, and then roaming from window to window in search of me. Idiot. “Was there something you wanted to ask me in person, then?” he asked. He and most of his allies had been communicating using Charles’s spell lately, since it was faster than either owl or firecall, and Harry was determined not to forget his advantages again.

“Yes,” said Honoria. “Or rather, something that magic requires me to ask in person. I’m calling in my life debt that you owe me from the Woodhouse battle.”

Harry blinked. “All right, then. What do you want?”

Honoria leaned forward. “You said that Augustus Starrise is joining the alliance?” Harry nodded, wondering if she had come to ask him to persuade Augustus out of it. Honoria didn’t say that, though. “I want you to try and reconcile him and Tybalt.”
Harry closed his eyes. He knew Augustus better now, from several letters they’d exchanged, and of course he knew what Tybalt was like. He wasn’t looking forward to this. “What was the cause of their disagreement in the first place?” He couldn’t recall either Augustus or Tybalt specifically mentioning it.

“Tybalt got joined to John,” said Honoria. “And John’s Muggleborn. Augustus thinks Muggleborns are good enough to protect and say you like, but not good enough to bring into the family.”

Harry groaned. *So I’m up against pureblood bigotry. Great.*

“Don’t think of it as a problem,” said Honoria brightly. “Think of it as a grand opportunity. After all, you’d have to confront the prejudices that the pureblood families carry sometime, right? This is practice.”

Harry nodded wearily and stood, carefully putting the book on Greek magic aside. He did feel the urge, for just a moment, to say that life wasn’t fair, and to ask Honoria to make her life debt watching him wrestle dragons or something similar.

But, if he hadn’t asked for these burdens when he decided to be a leader, he hadn’t put himself in a position to refuse them, either. He opened his eyes and smiled at Honoria. “Let’s contact them, then, and tell them we want to meet.”

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**Chapter Fifty: Waltzing Politics**

Harry sighed as he folded Augustus Starrise’s letter. At least the man had actually agreed to come and speak to his nephew at Hogwarts, instead of insisting that Tybalt and Harry go to the Starrise home. Harry knew it wouldn’t have been neutral ground, couldn’t have been, not after Augustus had kicked Tybalt out of it.

He shifted and cast a longing glance at the book on Greek witches on the other end of the library table. He’d spent the rest of Saturday writing to Augustus and arguing with Tybalt by means of the spell that Charles had taught him, trying to convince him to come to Hogwarts. It had taken hours to wear Tybalt down, and then he had only agreed to come if John could come with him and Honoria could be there. Harry had agreed, glad to win any kind of victory after hours of argument.

And then Augustus’s letter had come this morning, full of pompous agreement to speak in negotiations because “he was not in the wrong,” and he was sure that a conversation or two would show Harry that.

Harry sighed and glanced at the other letter waiting for him. It had the Ministry seal on it, and he knew it came from Scrimgeour. He didn’t want to read it. Merlin knew what the Minister had discovered that required his attention, and required him to communicate with Harry about it.

“Harry?”

And there was Draco, threading in between the library tables with a determined expression on his face. Harry winced. Draco had accepted, over the last couple of weeks, that Harry was too busy researching Ariadne’s Web to help him with his possession gift, save in scattered lessons, or even spend much time with him. But from the way he sat down on the chair at the other end of the table, his patience had just run out.

“Harry,” Draco said, insistently.

“I’m paying attention,” Harry said quietly, and reminded himself that he had no right to complain. He had wanted this position of leader, at least to the extent that he hadn’t objected all that much when it fell on him, and he had commanded his allies’ help in battle and the Minister’s help in politics. And Draco had given him so much more than mere help. That all his debts were coming due at once was unfortunate, but no more than that. It was not a malicious conspiracy, and it was not evil, and he had no reason to feel dread coiling in his stomach as Draco stared at him.

What Draco said was completely unexpected, however, and rather ruined Harry’s attempts to keep a smooth mask.

“Have you spoken with Vera since that night we came back from the trial?”

Harry stared at Draco. “No?” he asked at last, but when Draco gave him a searching glance, he shook his head. “No. You know I haven’t. Why? Is something the matter with her?” He supposed Vera might have had to leave the school, if her gift had started to overwhelm her, but he couldn’t imagine her not coming and telling him if she had to.
“No.” Draco leaned forward. “And she hasn’t come to nag me about it, either. I just think that you should go and talk to her.”

Harry couldn’t help the snort that broke from him. “Sorry, Draco, I can’t. I have a meeting with Augustus and Tybalt Starrise—not to mention Tybalt’s partner and Honoria Pemberley—at noon.” He nodded to the Minister’s letter. “And that to answer, too. I’m not sure what Scrimgeour wants. Then I should get back to looking up material on Ariadne’s Web.” He eyed the book, but controlled his longing to reach for it. For all he knew, Scrimgeour’s letter could take hours to answer.

“What about this evening?” Draco persisted. “Surely your meeting with the Starrises ought to be over by then?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know how long it’ll take to persuade Tybalt and Augustus to reconcile. Probably longer than just today, though.”

“Then dismiss them if they’re still here when evening comes, and go talk to Vera,” said Draco firmly.

Harry frowned. “Are you sure she didn’t talk to you, Draco? It’s all right to say if she did. I know I’ve been neglecting her lately, but I don’t think I have much choice. I have to figure out how to break Ariadne’s Web.”

Draco leaned forward over the table and clasped his hand. “She hasn’t spoken to me about you, just about my own soul—"

“Really? What did she say?” Harry felt pleased. Draco quite obviously didn’t give himself enough credit for some of what he knew and was, but he would have to trust a Seer’s word on the subject.

Draco shook his head. “Oh, no. I am not getting you interested in something else, not when you’d just try to pursue it. My conversations with Vera are staying between her and me for right now. The point, Harry, is that I think you’ve started neglecting your own healing for the sake of others’.”

Harry lifted his head. “I didn’t! I promise, Draco, I haven’t. I meant what I said that night in the Room of Requirement. I’m not going backwards. I promise.” He felt a mild panic at the thought of Draco disbelieving him. Going through this change was something Harry had known would be hard, but if he had to go through it alone—he didn’t think he would have the strength to do it.

“Harry!” Draco’s free hand settled on his shoulder. “Harry, it’s all right,” he said softly. “Breathe. I don’t disbelieve you. I don’t think you’re going backwards. But you’re neglecting it, yes.”

Harry stirred restlessly and looked at the book again. “I have to figure out how to break Ariadne’s Web, Draco,” he said. “My allies’ children are trapped in that school, not to mention Greg and all of the others. No one should have to be at Bellatrix Lestrange’s mercy.” He shuddered as a memory of the graveyard bit him, and his left hand throbbed. He didn’t care that it wasn’t there; it still throbbed. “What kind of leader am I, if I don’t figure out how to break it?”

“You’ve looked for two weeks,” said Draco. “Do you really think there’s still something left to find? And I’m sure that Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara are looking as well. Do you think they have less motivation than you do to find a solution? Harry, stop driving yourself mad over this. Think about something else. You can’t find a way past Ariadne’s Web right now. That’s all right. It’s all right. I promise.”

“And what if she kills one of them?” Harry clenched his hand shut until he saw Draco wince, and realized he’d injured him. He pulled his hand back at once, and shook his head, whipping his fingers through his fringe. “Sorry. Sorry. I’m sorry. I just—I have to do something.”

“You can’t,” said Draco softly.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. *Merlin, is he right?* But admitting that felt like he was giving up without a fight. There had to be a solution, something he was overlooking. The thought of anyone at Bellatrix Lestrange’s mercy made him feel like someone had used the Entrail-Expelling Curse on him again, and even though he knew that was exactly the reason Voldemort had chosen to use children as his hostages, that didn’t make the feeling go away.

“Enough, Harry.” Draco moved up behind him and caught him in a close embrace. “I didn’t realize you were driving yourself this close to breakdown over it, and neither did Professor Snape, or he would have made you stop researching. Think about something else. There are other things happening.” He lowered his head and rubbed his cheek against Harry’s hair.

“I know that,” Harry whispered, turning his head so that he could rest his cheek on Draco’s chest. “But I need to think about and research Ariadne’s Web, and find time for them, too.”
“Harry.” Draco made it all but a command, now. “Leave it up to Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara.”

“There might be books at Hogwarts that—“

“Then I’m sure the Headmistress wouldn’t deny them permission to come here and do the research,” said Draco firmly. “But you’re not going to do them or their children any good by worrying yourself into a frenzy. And if they’re not contacting you begging or imploring you to do anything right now, then why do you think you have to?”

“I’m vates,” whispered Harry. “It’s a web. I have to break it.”

“Not the moment you hear of it.” Draco’s arms clamped around his shoulders. “I mean it, Harry. Calm down and think about something else, or I’ll speak to Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara. You haven’t talked to them at all in the last two weeks, have you? You decided that you absolutely had to solve the problem right away on your own? They didn’t ask you to do this?”

“No, but the hostages are children, Draco—“

“And they’re beyond your reach right now,” Draco finished quietly. “That’s the way it has to be, Harry. If it will make you feel better, select some books and send them to Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara. But leave the task of research up to them. They’re parents. They have all the love and worry needed in the world. You’re going to have to start trusting your allies to do things on their own at some point, Harry.”

Harry winced. He was remembering a conversation he and Draco had had summer before fourth year, when Draco had reminded him that some people might want to follow Harry, and he would have to let them, because it was their free will. This sounded suspiciously like that.

“I—I’ll try,” he whispered. The thought of the children was still tearing at him, but he recognized his own frustration from his childhood. Whenever he got upset, his effectiveness at training in spells and doing other things necessary to protecting Connor would go down. Right now, it was affecting the way he thought about other necessary tasks than breaking the web, and probably also the way he read the books.Intolerable as it was to leave the web intact for this long, it would be even more intolerable to miss something that could have helped the children at Durmstrang because he was flipping feverishly through the books instead of taking the time to absorb the information.

“Good,” Draco said, and held him for a moment. Harry let himself absorb the heat for as long as he could before the shivers of discomfort broke out and he had to sit up and move away. Draco sighed, but said nothing, just taking the seat across from him again and eyeing him intently.

“Promise me that you’ll speak with Vera this evening?”

Harry nodded. “I didn’t mean to stop,” he protested again. It was important that Draco understand that. “It’s just—other things came up.”

“Someday, I hope,” said Draco, his face easing back from its tightness, “you’ll learn that not everyone expects you to solve every problem, right now.” He let one hand brush along Harry’s shoulder, and then departed the library.

Harry watched him go, a feeling of determination growing in the pit of his stomach. Draco did so much for him—speaking words he couldn’t have been all that fond of speaking, or thought that Harry should have known already, since they were common sense; reaching out to him; refusing to abandon him in a fit of exasperation or temper until Harry actually did see sense.

He deserved better than Harry had been able to give him so far. But since Harry knew Draco wasn’t about to go anywhere, at least he could try to give Draco what he was able to give him.

Harry sighed the resolution out, then picked up the Minister’s letter. It was brief, as Scrimgeour’s letters tended to be, and to the point.

December 3rd, 1995

Dear Harry:

I require your help to make some important decisions. There are three people currently in Tullianum with whom you have some connection: Kingsley Shacklebolt, who tried to kill you; Fiona Mallory, who tortured your parents; and Homer Digle, who wrote
articles to discredit you and also apparently permitted another member of the Order of the Phoenix to visit Dumbledore and free him so he could cast his spell. All of them are claiming they acted as they did because of Dumbledore’s compulsion spell. I have to know if you are willing to press charges or not. Please come to the Ministry this afternoon if you are free. Enclosed is a Portkey that will bear you to my office anytime between noon and six-o’clock this evening.

Rufus Scrimgeour.

Harry sighed, and eyed the Portkey, a bottle cap, that tipped out of the envelope. That meant he would probably have to cut his meeting with Tybalt and Augustus Starrise short, in order to journey to the Ministry and talk to Scrimgeour, and could give them only a few hours.

Do you owe them more than a few hours?

Harry paused, and shook his head. That was a new thought, and in a new tone, one that might have been Vera’s. He supposed he was only having it at all because of everything else he had to do. Circumstances were finally conspiring to make it impossible for him to do everything, much as he hated to admit it, so he would have to juggle and cut some things short, and if that meant not listening to Augustus and Tybalt rant at each other all day, so be it.

Honoria had not said, after all, that he had to reconcile the two proud and stubborn men or die trying. She had said only that she wanted him to do what he could to initiate a reconciliation.

Harry slid the Minister’s Portkey into his pocket, wrote a brief note to tell him he’d be coming later in the afternoon that he would take to the Owlery in a moment, and scooped up the book on Greek magic. He would look through it, see if there was anything useful, and ask Charles where he should send it if there was. No, on second thought, he would speak to Thomas. Charles had said that he would be negotiating with old contacts in an effort to get a Portkey that would actually take them to Durmstrang, and might be at that and not want to be disturbed.

Harry set his mouth in a thin line. So this is the way it has to be. I can’t do everything perfectly, because I’m not perfect. I’ll do what I can, and ask others to live with it. If they can’t, they can always withdraw from the alliance.

* * *

“Thank you for coming.”

Augustus gave Harry a lazy smile, and kept his eyes perfectly trained on Harry’s face. “Thank you for inviting me, my lord.”

Harry grimaced at the title. “Please, none of that.” He gestured to the large round table that took up the center of the Room of Requirement. The Room had seemed to know what they needed—in this case, a table that absolutely would not make anyone feel unequal to anyone else. “Have a seat. Your nephew, his partner, and Miss Pemberley should be here soon.”

Augustus had started to sit down, but he paused, his face acquiring a light flush. “You know Miss Pemberley by now, I would assume, my—Harry. You know that she will interrupt, make a scene, and do anything that she can to disrupt matters.”

Augustus, amazingly, sat down, but shook his head so that his long pale hair, braided with bells, rang and shifted. Harry actually found that encouraging. If Augustus wanted to remind Harry about his training as a war wizard, that was a sign that he was less than perfectly confident. “You know Miss Pemberley by now, I would assume, my—Harry. You know that she will interrupt, make a scene, and do anything that she can to disrupt matters.”

Augustus nodded, once. “I must say, Harry, that you are being more reasonable about this than I expected,” he murmured.

“I don’t think she will,” said Harry. “She was the one who asked for me to try and manage your reconciliation. But I acknowledge that she might not be able to control herself. If she does show a sign of starting to interrupt in any way, then I’ll cast a Silencio on her. She’s not Starrise by blood, and she wasn’t the one who was part of Tybalt’s original offense against you.” Harry had to fight hard not to curl his lip when he said “offense,” but he succeeded. “She has no reason to talk.”

Augustus nodded, once. “I must say, Harry, that you are being more reasonable about this than I expected,” he murmured.

“Why?” Harry kept an eye on the door of the Room. McGonagall had promised to send Tybalt, John, and Honoria to him the
moment they arrived, and since she would be with her friends, Honoria couldn’t come flying in as a gull. But he still thought he would have only a moment between the door opening and the first insult being hurled, unless he managed to get in between Tybalt and his uncle with formalities. “I don’t want discord among my allies, Merlin knows.”

“Ah, but your mother was Muggleborn,” said Augustus smoothly. “I thought you would at once attack me for my—what would be the term? Unreasonable prejudice, is what Tybalt has called it. I thought you would insist loudly that of course they are equal to purebloods in each and every way, and should be able to marry into any pureblood family they want.”

“I do believe that.” Harry tensed, then shook his head when he realized that the flicker of movement he’d seen was his own shadow. In shifting his weight from foot to foot, he’d managed to send it skittering across the door.


Harry turned his head and frowned at the man. “I don’t insist that my allies think exactly like I do,” he said shortly. “What would be the point of that? You have your own mind, your own soul, your own beliefs. You’ve seen mine, and you can’t object to them too badly, or you wouldn’t have chosen to join the alliance. I can hope to persuade you as time passes, but I won’t force you. I certainly won’t attack you.”

Augustus stared hard at him. Harry rolled his eyes, and then turned swiftly back the other way as the door opened.

Honoria came in first, clad in a flowing robe much like a gown, ornamented with illusions of letters that spelled out Tybalt’s name with several exclamation marks after it. Harry narrowed his eyes warningly at her, and she did no more than pout at him. At least the letters didn’t seem to spell anything insulting to Augustus, Harry saw with relief.

Tybalt followed her. He wore a blood-red robe touched with threads of blue. John, at his side, wore red touched with gold. Harry stifled a groan. John’s robe said that he could and would declare blood-feud if the negotiations didn’t go to his liking; it was a reference back to the old days of wizarding politics when “blood and gold” would have been the reward a displeased family tried to claim from others. Tybalt wore only slightly less offensive colors, proclaiming his willingness to accept either blood or a sky untouched by a cloud—the cloud in this case being the presence of a relative he hated.

Harry felt frustration start churning in his gut, and decided abruptly that he might as well speak it out. Both Augustus and Tybalt, for all their agreement, had come prepared to undermine the negotiations. Why should he have to put up with that? He was the one who was doing something he didn’t have to do, putting himself in the way of a family quarrel, and if neither party would take it seriously, then he didn’t intend to waste his time here. He had dozens of more productive things he could be doing than trying to reconcile people who refused to be reconciled.

“Change the colors of your robes, now,” he snapped at Tybalt and John. “Or admit that you just came to play games, and then we can all leave.”

Tybalt had his mouth open, probably to insult his uncle, but he shut it. He stared at Harry. Harry frowned back at him. The sensation of eyes on him didn’t bother him at all when he was angry at the person in question.

Tybalt decided to play dumb—not a wise choice when it was only his actions that were stupid. “But, Harry,” he chirped, “we wanted to wear these colors. I think they look particularly fine on us.” He looked at John as if he were about to shag his partner in the middle of the floor. John returned the look. Harry could hear Augustus’s bells shake as he shifted in place.

“You knew perfectly well what you were doing,” said Harry flatly. “Change them, now. I mean it.”

“But you have to fulfill the life debt,” Honoria said. “I asked you for to try and reconcile Tybalt and Augustus, and—“

“That’s what I’m doing,” said Harry. “I got them in the same room. I’m prepared to play diplomat if they actually want to try. If not, then I will send them home like misbehaving children.” He frowned at Honoria. “And, while we’re at it, Honoria, you should know that it’s forbidden for the person owed the life debt to do something that makes it harder for the other wizard to pay them back, unless they deliberately use difficult wording in the initial request. You know what these colors mean, and you let them wear them anyway.”

Honoria’s face was pale now. “I thought—I thought it would be funny,” she said. “A joke.”

“And yet, I am not laughing.” Harry spun around and faced Augustus. “I apologize, sir. I didn’t know they would do this.”

Augustus inclined his head, his eyes glinting, and chose to say nothing at all. Harry wondered if that was wisdom on his part or
sadistic amusement—if he was perhaps looking forward to seeing how Harry would deal with two wizards and a witch he obviously did regard as disobedient youngsters.

“I wanted to wear these colors,” said John then, spinning Harry back around. “Tybalt did tell me what they mean, but I wanted to wear them because they express what I feel.”

Harry had his answer. “So you came never intending to reconcile at all.” He nodded. “That’s good to know. Well, now you’ve had your joke and your insult, and the terms of my life debt to Miss Pemberley are fulfilled. She asked that I try to reconcile your partner and his uncle. I’ve tried. That’s enough.”

“How can you take him seriously?” Tybalt demanded. “Look at him, the pompous braggart! Bells in his hair, of all the stupid affectations! And he’s prejudiced against Muggleborns, and your mother was one, and you know that’s not right, Harry. How can you defend—”

“An heir who turns against the legacy of his bloodline?” Augustus asked, his voice soft and mocking. “A boy who is a traitor to the memory of his mother? I would wonder more if Harry were trying to defend you. He renounced his legacy rather than try to be an heir of the Potter line when he knew it would be impossible for him, and he gave up his parents rather than continue to mock and torment them. If only you could follow his example, Tybalt.”

“I am not a traitor to the memory of my mother! Take that—”

“You are.” Augustus leaned forward, the gold-bound white staff in his hand glinting. Harry had backed out of the space between them. “Alba would be horrified, could she see the elder son she bore. Defying everything his uncle asked of him, turning his back on his family instead of—”

“She would be horrified if she could see?” Tybalt’s face was as red and pale-splotchy as someone in the early stages of dragonpox. “I thought you believed she did see. You certainly talk about her as often as if she were still alive. You were always a little bit obsessed with her, in fact, uncle. I wonder, is the rumor I heard about you two true? That you didn’t have separate beds until you were seventeen?”

Augustus lurched to his feet with a wordless roar and a mighty clash of bells, and lowered his staff. Harry felt it begin to shake with magic. Augustus was one of those wizards who stored some of his power in another object, and could cast it back wandlessly when he had need. Merlin knew what spell he was thinking about using on his nephew right now.

Harry shook his head and reached out to the Room of Requirement. It manifested a stone wall between Augustus and Tybalt, quickly enough that they both stopped yelling in astonishment. Harry walked to the door, though he did turn to survey them briefly.

“If you don’t both leave Hogwarts quietly and go home without attempting to hurt each other,” he said, “then I will know, and I will cast you both out of the alliance. I won’t stand for my allies attacking each other. I declare the terms of the life debt fulfilled, and this experiment a failure, and both of you closer in family resemblance than you probably like to think, given your shared flair for insults. I’m disappointed in both of you. I suppose it’s useless to remind you that, in fact, I am the one who’s fifteen years old here?”

He stepped out of the Room and shut the door behind him, half-wishing it would just keep them cooped up in there. But someone might die if it did.

He went to tell Snape and Draco—they were both in the dungeons, with Snape helping Draco with an experimental potion he wanted to try—that he was going to the Ministry. If people would be children, Harry would go and do something more productive.

* 

Sometimes, Rufus hated having to follow the rules.

In this case, the rules said that he was not allowed to hex people just for breathing, even if all three of those people were Aurors who had failed him in various ways. He had to remain in the anteroom to Tullianum, where Shacklebolt, Mallory, and Digle waited under the eyes of three considerably more rule-abiding Aurors, and pretend to be concentrating on his paperwork. Harry had owled to say that he was coming to speak about pressing charges, or not, “later in the afternoon.” And since Rufus had been the one to send him a Portkey set for any time between noon and six in the evening, he was the one who’d condemned himself to sitting in one place until Harry arrived.
Digle breathed as if he were thinking of arguments to excuse his actions, and just barely restraining himself from saying them. Mallory breathed huffily, coming out at the end with a sigh—a pattern Rufus was familiar with, since he’d crouched beside her before in ambush. Shacklebolt breathed like an old man. All of them were claiming that Dumbledore’s compulsion spell had caused them to act the way they had. Rufus disbelieved Digle, at the least, but there was nothing he could do about it; both Veritaserum and Legilimency were illegal unless the person in question consented to them, and none of the prisoners had. The next step was up to Harry.

A soft gleam came from off to the side, and the prisoners all turned expectantly towards it. Rufus was pleased to see that their guards, at least, kept their wands trained on the prisoners, not the gleam. The light resolved into a whirling Harry, who recovered his balance neatly and slid the bottle cap back into his pocket.

“Sir,” he said to Rufus, with a nod, and then turned and looked at the prisoners. His mouth tightened. Rufus could see his eyes suddenly looking older, but wasn’t entirely sure what emotion made them look so. Harry said nothing else, his eyes intent on Mallory’s face, so Rufus took it on himself to make the introductions.

“Kingsley Shacklebolt,” he said. “Order of the Phoenix member until I sacked him, and now claiming that Dumbledore compelled him to try and murder you. Fiona Mallory, once Head Auror, and now claiming that Dumbledore’s spell compelled her to torture your parents—“

“It did,” said Mallory loudly. “I would have managed to restrain myself if it hadn’t been for the spell.”

Rufus shot her a hard glance. *Come down to it, I don’t believe her, either.* Mallory was his greatest failure. He was the one who had put her in charge of the Aurors, and he should have removed her altogether when he first found her hurting the Potters, not merely forbidden her to handle the case. “And Homer Digle, Muggleborn Auror and undercover Order of the Phoenix member, claiming that he only wrote articles under the name Argus Veritaserum and sent them to the Daily Prophet because Dumbledore forced him to do that.”

“But you also let someone have access to Dumbledore,” Harry told Digle. “Didn’t you? So that means that you had to have known what you were doing before the spell even took effect.”

Rufus grinned. He knew it was a harsh and frightening expression, but merely knowing that didn’t much inspire him to change it. He had believed that, too, but Digle refused to comment one way or the other, probably so that he wouldn’t reveal whoever else had been in on his crime. Even Wilmot hadn’t been able to get the information out of him. Harry could, perhaps, get him to reveal who had been at Dumbledore, and then Rufus would be one step closer to thoroughly cleansing his Ministry.

Digle’s face retained the same bored expression it had since he had come to the anteroom. “I was a victim of the spell,” he said. “And of Dumbledore’s reputation. I believed him to be a good man. Now I know he is not.”

“You didn’t believe the accusations of child abuse,” said Harry. “But you believe him to be an evil man because he compelled you?”

Digle shrugged. “Yes.”

Rufus ground the teeth. The man wasn’t even *trying* hard to pretend he was innocent. But rules forbade Rufus from using any of the tools that would have *proved* his guilt. Digle had a convenient excuse, a too-convenient one, in that thrice-bedamned spell. He could escape prosecution entirely, at least if Harry declined to press charges, and the Daily Prophet was of course claiming that they had no idea the man sending them the articles had been an Order of the Phoenix member. Rufus wished, as he often had, that someone had invented a spell that would force all reporters to write only the truth. *Just for one day. One day is all I ask for.*

“I don’t believe you,” said Harry softly.

Digle tensed. “Are you using Legilimency on me?” he demanded, and Rufus blinked in astonishment. Digle hadn’t shown any signs of losing his composure since the day in Rufus’s office when he’d tried to draw his wand and Wilmot had stopped him. Now his shoulders were hunched, and his voice snapped out the words. “You know that’s illegal.”

Rufus leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrows. *It’s Harry’s presence, I think. That’s upsetting him. Merlin, how Digle must hate the boy.*

Harry looked calmly at the ex-Auror. “I’m not using Legilimency on you. I just said that I don’t believe you. You were in the Order. You believed in what Dumbledore was doing. You let someone have access to him even though you knew that he would
be able to cast magic if he was freed of the Still-Beetle confinement—magic that could potentially have a number of disastrous effects on me or on anyone else he disliked. You might have believed you were doing the right thing before the compulsion, but what you did was still illegal and dangerous.”

Digle hissed through his teeth. “I don’t believe in him now,” he said—entirely unconvincingly. Rufus snorted. *I might be forced to let him go if we can’t prove anything against him, but I can certainly sack him.*

“I think you do,” said Harry quietly. “And I don’t think that I can let you walk out of here. Granted, you might not attack me again, but you might attack someone else I care about. You caused a great deal of potential damage to other people’s minds, even if only indirectly. You took away their free will.” Rufus hid a smile at the chill gleam in Harry’s eyes. “I’m going to press charges for that.” He turned and nodded at Rufus. “Libel for a start, and I’d certainly think indirect magical endangerment is a potential charge, since he had to have known that any spell Dumbledore cast would be bound to affect me.”

“Very true,” Rufus agreed gravely, trying to keep from laughing. “We’ll charge him, then.”

“You can’t!” Digle spat. “You have no evidence!”

“I have someone who would be willing to help me procure some,” said Harry brightly. “Does the name Henrietta Bulstrode mean anything to you, Digle?”

Rufus saw the whiplash of shock that crossed the man’s face. He recovered to sneer, “She has no evidence, either,” but he hadn’t been quick enough. Rufus made a quiet note to investigate Digle’s connection to Henrietta Bulstrode, and any visits he might have made to her.

Harry nodded at him, and turned to Mallory, giving her a searching stare. “Do you really think that you would have been able to control yourself, if not for Dumbledore’s spell?” he asked.

Mallory looked down. Rufus recognized the gesture. Fiona was ashamed of herself, and was trying to hold strong in the face of that shame. It overwhelmed her, though. It usually did. She was so used to thinking of herself in the right that when something did prick her conscience, it had to be a strong sting.

“I—I think so,” she whispered. “I was taken off the case because I bothered them before. I had maintained my distance for a few months by the time I lost control and cursed them. I could feel the desire to do it growing stronger and stronger, but I didn’t tell anyone for fear of being sacked. Yes, I think it was the spell.”

Harry stared at her bowed head for a long moment. Rufus could not tell what he was thinking. Finally, he sighed and said, “I won’t press charges, Minister. I still don’t want her anywhere near Lily or James, mind—not assigned to patrol the corridors that contain their cells, even. But no, no charges.”

Rufus nodded. In truth, it was a bit irregular to ask if Harry wanted to press charges against Mallory at all, but Lily and James had no right to do so from prison, and the Ministry itself was concerned in her case, so Rufus hadn’t felt right prosecuting her without giving Harry a say. As it was, any further punishment would be up to Amelia Bones, as her immediate supervisor, since there was no doubt that she had done it; only her motivation was in question. Rufus was fairly sure that Amelia would arrange to sack Mallory quietly.

It was a worse end than he had once dreamed of when he hired Mallory despite her past and her issues, but a better one than she would have had if Harry had decided to bring up charges, perhaps for mental pain.

That left Shacklebolt. Harry chewed his lip for a long moment as he stared at the tall man, who kept his head bowed over his hands. Then he said, “And why did you use the Killing Curse? Why not just a spell that might stun me or Obliviate me and keep me from testifying in the trial?”

Shacklebolt huddled down in the chair, but his voice, though flat, was clear. “Because that wasn’t the compulsion that took hold of me. It said you were supposed to be dead, not just incapable of hurting your parents further.”

Harry nodded slowly. “And how long did you feel that compulsion?”

“That one? Since just that morning.” Shacklebolt looked up. His eyes were haunted, but Rufus could not be sure how much of that was real. Shacklebolt had been a wonderful actor when he was still an Auror; it had taken Rufus’s suspicions, that he had a greater loyalty to a Light Lord than to the Ministry, months to coalesce. “Before that, I just felt the same vague disgust that I think everyone under the compulsion felt.”
Harry held still for a long time, his face unhappy. Then he asked, “Did you work towards my destruction, or the destruction of anyone I hold dear, at all before the compulsion spell was cast?”

Shacklebolt stiffened. Then he said, “I don’t think you’re allowed to ask me that. Is he?” Absurdly, he glanced at Rufus.

Rufus tilted his head. “He’s potentially going to charge you for attempted murder and using an Unforgivable,” he said helpfully. “I’d say he’s allowed to ask you anything he damn well pleases.” Sometimes, there are ways to get around the rules.

Shacklebolt squirmed. Then he said, “No,” but his pause and his question to Rufus had marked him. Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t wish to charge him,” he said coolly. “But there were other people on the street with me that morning, and he cast the Killing Curse more than once. I think you should talk to Lucius Malfoy, Minister. He might be interested to know that Shacklebolt’s first victim would have been his own son, if I hadn’t knocked Draco to the ground.”

“But that was an accident!” Shacklebolt exclaimed. “I was under a compulsion at the time. I had no idea—“

“I don’t believe you,” said Harry steadily. “I really don’t. I’m not going to charge you with anything, but that’s as far as I’ll take it. I don’t know what else to do in this situation, so I’ll leave it in the Ministry’s capable hands.” He glanced at Rufus with his eyebrows raised, and Rufus inclined his head. Without someone charging him, Shacklebolt couldn’t remain in Tullianum for much longer, but Rufus was sure that Mr. Malfoy would be highly interested in keeping the man who had almost hurt his son from making a reappearance.

It’ll probably end in snapping his wand, Rufus thought, but he was not entirely displeased. They didn’t really need to imprison or execute Shacklebolt, simply make sure that he couldn’t do any more harm—or else that he was useful to their cause, whether or not he wanted to be. Releasing him, and then keeping tabs on him, to see who else he contacted, was an option, as well.

“Then I think I have no other business here,” said Harry crisply. “Thank you for inviting me to be part of this, Minister. I’ll file charges against Digle through my guardian, and—“

Digle moved. He’d sat back down in his chair, half-slumped, ever since Harry had first spoken of filing charges, but now he uncoiled and shot straight at Harry. He had no wand, but he did have something small and glittering in his hand, something that shone like steel, and which Rufus could not believe the Tullianum guards hadn’t found and taken away.

Harry stepped calmly to the side, so that Digle’s stabbing hand soared past his shoulder, and then concentrated on the man’s feet. An invisible rope tangled them and appeared to pull tight. The next instant, Digle was dangling upside down above the floor, his robes falling to cover his head and the knife plummeting out of his hand to ring on the hard stone. The three Aurors in the room belatedly swore and lifted their wands to point at him, though two of them turned back to Mallory and Shacklebolt before Rufus had to snap at them.

Harry, breathing slightly faster, looked at Rufus and said, “Do you think a charge of attempted murder without the compulsion would be more trouble than it’s worth?”

“No,” said Rufus flatly. All his amusement at the events of the afternoon drained away. He was going to figure out how Digle had got that knife. It seemed he still had plants in his Ministry. In such cases, he was more than willing to bend the rules. “I think it would be an excellent idea, and you may press that charge through your guardian as well, if you want.”

Harry winced. “I would prefer the Ministry handle it, actually, sir. If Professor Snape hears that I was almost killed when visiting the Ministry on my own, I’ll have to have guards again for at least a month.”

Rufus nodded. Veritaserum blends well with pumpkin juice. “I’ll handle it, Mr. Pot—Harry.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Harry quietly. “Do you have a Portkey that will take me back?”

“Grip the Portkey I gave you and say Portus again,” said Rufus. He gave the boy a quick glance, making absolutely sure that he wasn’t damaged, and then focused on Digle again as Harry nodded to him and vanished. The man had no excuse to claim compulsion now. And he knew who the person had been who had caused Dumbledore’s magic to spread.

He was going to talk. Rufus was not amused by murder attempts of any kind, especially ones that happened right in front of him.
Harry hesitated outside the small room in which he’d had his last talk with Vera, and swallowed. He had to admit that he was only here because of his promise to Draco. It would have been—well, not better, but all right not to speak with her for a while, right? He’d originally planned to use this evening for research, but Thomas had told him to send the book on Greek witches and anything else he thought might help to the Ministry Auror office, care of his wife, who was now Head Auror, so that Voldemort wouldn’t see them communicating. Harry had obeyed that command so enthusiastically that he now had no likely books left to look at.

He could have used this for something else, though. His healing wasn’t less important than other things, it was just, well—

“You may go in, Harry.”

Harry jumped and glanced over his shoulder. Vera stood behind him, her smile patient and her eyes either not amused or simply inscrutable, so that he had no chance of telling what she was feeling. Harry bowed his head, swallowed, and pushed the door open.

The room remained almost as it had been, with the strange white chairs and the large fireplace, but now paintings hung on the wall, formless blue designs that Harry supposed might comfort Vera and be a touch of the Sanctuary in a strange place. There was a sprawled mass of cloth on the chair where Vera had sat last time, which she moved to take her seat. Harry wondered if she was actually making something, or only putting stitches together for fun. Then she looked up at him, and he didn’t have any excuse to avoid sitting down in his own chair.

“Your Malfoy thinks you’ve been avoiding me,” said Vera quietly.

“I haven’t,” said Harry. “I really haven’t. I just got caught up in other things, and thought this could wait.”

Vera cocked her head at him. “And you think that is a true statement, rather than a relic of your training to put yourself last?”

“Yes.” It was important they understand that. Harry didn’t intend to ever go backwards again. “You’ve heard about the situation with Durmstrang? And Ariadne’s Web? And the children trapped there?”

“Your Malfoy has told me something of it.”

Harry nodded. “I have to do something to help them. I’m a vates; I want to break the web. And they’re just children. It’s not like they chose to take sides in this war, or chose their parents’ politics, or ever asked to be caught up in what Bellatrix Lestrange is going to do to them. Someone has to stop that, and no one else has found a solution so far. So why shouldn’t I try?”

Vera calmly pressed a strand of brown hair back behind her ear as it tried to escape its tight roll, never looking away from him while she did it. Harry squirmed. He could tell himself that she’d seen his soul already and knew things about him that not even he did, but that didn’t keep the intense physical pressure of her gaze from bothering him.

“There is no reason you should not try,” Vera agreed, after a silence that Harry thought went on much too long, and made him think things he didn’t want to think. “But there is no reason that you should blame yourself for this happening, or for failing to find a solution immediately.”

Harry clenched his teeth, and then swallowed. “I am part of the reason this happened,” he murmured. “I’m part of the war.”

“Do you truly blame yourself?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s complicated.”

“I have no pressing appointments, Harry, I assure you.” Vera smiled at him. “Take as long as you like to speak.”

And that was another reason he still felt uncomfortable talking to her, Harry thought. Vera appeared to really believe that the outside world stopped when she was feeling him out, as though no one else could possibly need her help. Harry never forgot that the world was turning, that people were suffering and dying, that magical creatures were imprisoned elsewhere. It was one of the things that put him in an agony of impatience. He wanted to heal himself, yes, but couldn’t people see that it would have to fit in and around the gaps of larger, more important tasks?

He paused. Something about the thought seemed familiar, but from the other side, as if it were something he had once argued against. After a few instants of sifting through his memories, he found it.
He’d told Draco, after Draco cast the Killing Curse, that there was no getting past the business of daily life, that he couldn’t simply fulfill his duties and then relax. There were always more duties coming up. There were always new crises appearing. There was always the chance that something more pressing would distract him from healing or from the time set aside for pleasure.

He’d said that to comfort Draco, but it was true, wasn’t it? He survived by putting his head down and pushing.

And that meant that, if he was serious about healing, he couldn’t rush through all his other duties and then heal. More duties would appear like toadstools. He had to accept them, be ready for them. There was never a time when he could stop living and heal. He would have to integrate healing into his life and push through it just like any other task.

“Ah,” said Vera. “I see by your scowl that you appear to have arrived at a conclusion.”

Harry sighed and resisted the urge to put his head in his arms. It would ultimately make him feel childish, which wouldn’t give him the comfort he was seeking right now. “Yes, I have,” he said unwillingly. “I can’t put this off and hope a better day comes for dealing with it. That day will never come, not as long as Voldemort is alive, and maybe not after, either. I’m vates, after all, and I have to be available to help the magical creatures. I would always think I was going to heal myself after I freed the sirens, or negotiated a peace with the nundus, or helped this or that or the other species. It would never end, would it?”

“It would not,” Vera confirmed calmly. “And, Harry, you should consider that if you heal yourself, you will become a stronger vates.”

Harry cocked his head. “I wouldn’t have expected you to say that, since you’re so insistent on my healing myself for myself.”

“It is, nonetheless, something that will happen. I simply do not think you should make it your primary goal, to heal for others.” Vera leaned forward. “You have had your talk with your Malfoy as I requested, and heard what he wanted. Tell me, what did you think of it?”

Harry blinked at the change of subject, but went with it. It was easier than thinking about making room for yet another commitment in his round of days. “It was strange. I had some idea he’d want those things, but I still can’t get used to the idea of his wanting them with me.”

“And why not?”

Harry shook his head impatiently. “Because I don’t know why he loves me yet. He could have those things with other people. Why with me?”

“Have you asked him that?”

Harry frowned. “I don’t think he’d answer me. He acts resigned to the huge gap between the way he sees me and the way I see myself. Maybe he doesn’t have the words? And it’s rather self-centered and childish, to ask for a list of reasons why someone else loves you. It’s like asking for praise.”

“You do have the right to ask for that, you know,” said Vera softly. “I think you need to hear it. Others receive words of praise freely throughout their lives. You have received precious few.”

Harry glanced away, feeling his cheeks heat. “But it would embarrass me further,” he said.

“Why?”

Harry ground his teeth. “I suppose it’s the training,” he said reluctantly. He knew how Vera would react to this, and Draco, too; they saw the training as something he should never have had to endure. But enough good things came from it that Harry wanted to keep some of it. What would happen if he did ask Draco to do things like list why he loved Harry? It could propel Harry on a downhill slope that would end with him being selfish, and the wizarding world could not afford yet another selfish wizard with Lord-level power.

“Try it,” Vera told him calmly. “If it makes you feel too uncomfortable, then ask your Malfoy to stop. But you could do worse than this as a first step. You need to understand why others love you, if they can articulate those reasons, in order to accept your bonds with them.” She smiled slightly. “Your relationships are almost all the result of conscious choice, Harry. Perhaps it should not have been that way, perhaps you should be able to have unselfconscious, completely spontaneous trust in others, but it is that
Harry nodded, grateful she understood. “You know the reasons that you love others. So you will need to know the reasons others love you.”

Harry nodded a second time, reluctant, but convinced she was right. He’d said as much to Draco and Snape the day his parents were sentenced. He couldn’t imagine why they’d chosen him, out of all the people in the wizarding world, to give as much trust and love as they had. Other people could have fulfilled their needs equally well, and probably better, since they wouldn’t have the problems Harry had. So he would have to not only ask them why they’d chosen him, but remain in the room while they told him.

And, hopefully, not die of embarrassment.

“And what of your progress on other fronts?” Vera asked him then. “Have you tried to relearn pleasure in taste, in warmth, in other places that you have been exiled from?”

“I don’t see the point,” said Harry, convinced that he needed to bring this up now, or he probably never would. “What does it matter what porridge tastes like to me? Or chocolate?”

Vera frowned at him for the first time. “We have spoken of this already, Harry. It matters for the same reason it matters to other people.”

“But they’re them, and I’m me,” said Harry. “I’ve had the training, and I’m sorry for it, but there it is. I think I should be putting more effort into overcoming other things than how I feel when I eat eggs.”

“I did see your Malfoy encouraging you to vary your palate,” Vera murmured. “But if you think other things are more important, Harry, then of course we should concentrate on them. You will ask your Malfoy why he loves you?”

Harry winced. “Is that a command?”

“An encouragement,” said Vera. “A task that even you agree is important, and which I would like you to accomplish before I speak with you again. Along with asking him why he thinks it’s important for you to eat food other than porridge. Perhaps he will have an answer that changes your mind.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Harry muttered, and then blinked. He hadn’t known that was in there.

Vera leaned forward, suddenly looking more like a hawk than a wren. “Why, Harry? Why should you be afraid of learning to eat as others do, to laugh as others do, to enjoy the simple pleasures in life? Is it honest fear, I can see that from your eyes, and not simply the relic of the training. Why?”

Harry swallowed. “What happens if I become selfish because of it, and turn into a Dark Lord?” There, it was out in the open, no matter how stupid it sounded, and at least Vera knew what he was thinking.

Vera watched him for a long moment. Then she said, “You fear that a great deal, don’t you?” Harry nodded. “Why?”

“Not just because my mother and Dumbledore thought I would become a Dark Lord,” said Harry, forcing himself through the thoughts for the first time. “Not just because I can do things like swallow magic. I used to think that was it, but…I have all this magic. And the biggest characteristic that both Dumbledore and Voldemort share, besides their power, is that they want what they want, and they don’t care much about what others want. I know that Lily trained me to be too unselfish, but maybe that’s better than what I would turn into if I started caring too much about my wants.” He stared at Vera, wondering what her response would be.

It was gentle, at least, and she certainly didn’t tell him that he was stupid for thinking as he did. “There is no path absolutely free from evil, Harry,” she said quietly. “Even freedom can go too far, if you were to force someone to be free against her will. There is no certainty. I can understand why you would cling to the certainties that you have, but this is simply one more thing that needs to melt and change. You are at least conscious and aware of your actions if you are trying to enjoy the small pleasures of life, while, if you are secure in the thought that you cannot possibly be selfish, you might hurt others.”

Harry bowed his head and nodded. He’d seen what absolute conviction of his own rightness did to Dumbledore. It seemed strange that conviction of unselfishness could lead to that, but people could be fanatics for any cause.

Vera came to him and gently kissed his forehead. “That is all for now, Harry. Go and find your Malfoy, and ask him why he loves you. I think you will find his answers enlightening, and a good deal less embarrassing than you might suppose.”
Vera would know, Harry thought, as he nodded to her and took his leave. She’d seen Draco’s soul. She’d talked with him. She probably knew all the reasons for his love for Harry, even the ones he couldn’t articulate.

Perversely, that just made him surer that he would be embarrassed by it. Vera had a great deal more faith in him than he did in himself.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up and blinked. He’d run straight into Draco—probably not by coincidence, since Draco had known where he would go this evening. Draco regarded him with concern, and Harry shook his head and forced a smile.

“I’m all right,” he said quietly, and put his arm around Draco’s shoulders.

“Do you want to tell me what she said?”

Harry hesitated, then shook his head again. “Not yet,” he added. “I will sometime.” He’d had enough embarrassment today, what with the disastrous attempt to reconcile Tybalt and Augustus, and the fact that he hadn’t even seen Digle’s knife until the man lunged at him. He really would walk around for hours with a permanently red face if Draco started telling him why he loved him.

“All right,” said Draco.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned against him, feeling Draco’s arm curl around his shoulders in turn, for one moment taking comfort in the fact that, no matter how large and loud the world outside what they shared, Draco was there. And maybe it wasn’t cheating, wasn’t hiding, to take pleasure in his company and his gentleness and his love.

Maybe.

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51) The Choir Invisible
52) Harry Plays The Boy-Who-Lived
   Interlude: The Serpent Coils
53) Tonight There Shall Be No Moon
54) Even In The Deepest Dark, The Light Doth Shine
55) Bridling the Storm
56) Rejoicing
57) Resolutions
58) Light It All On Fire
59) First Time, First Choice
60) Peter's Day In Court
   Intermission: Ring the Changes
61) Follow Me Into Night
62) Everybody Yells at Harry
63) Cousin Arcturus Had a Sense of Humor
64) Stalked
65) Draco and Lucius
66) Malfoy, a History
67) When Light and Dark Get Together
   Interlude: The Serpent Strikes
68) Stolen Child
69) There Is Also Love In the World
70) Rapprochement
71) Not Since Merlin's Time
72) Probo Memoriter
73) The High Cost of Vengeance
74) Regulus's Shame
75) Fenrir Greyback's Legacy
76) For Such Is The World
77) Rewarding
78) Snape, Harry, and Their Issues
79) A Nest of Death Eaters
80) Calling Up the Wild Magic
81) Long and Sweet and Slow
82) Riddle Me This
83) Midsummer Breathing Down Their Necks
Interlude: Prince of Cats
84) Draco's Debut
85) Strategizing
Interlude: The Serpent Bites
86) End of Innocence
87) Path of Broken Glass
88) Tomorrow We Leave For Battle
89) Beneath This Storm of Light
90) Children of Godric and Helga
91) A Body Made of Music
92) Many-Legged
93) The Shining Road
Intermission: Counting Up the Dead
94) The Greatest of These Is Love
95) The Second Greatest Is Justice
96) The Minister and Mr. Potter
Interlude: The Liberator's First Letter
97) G.U.T.O.E.K.O.M.
98) Informed Consent
99) By His Hand
100) At Peace